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Fantasy & Science Fiction

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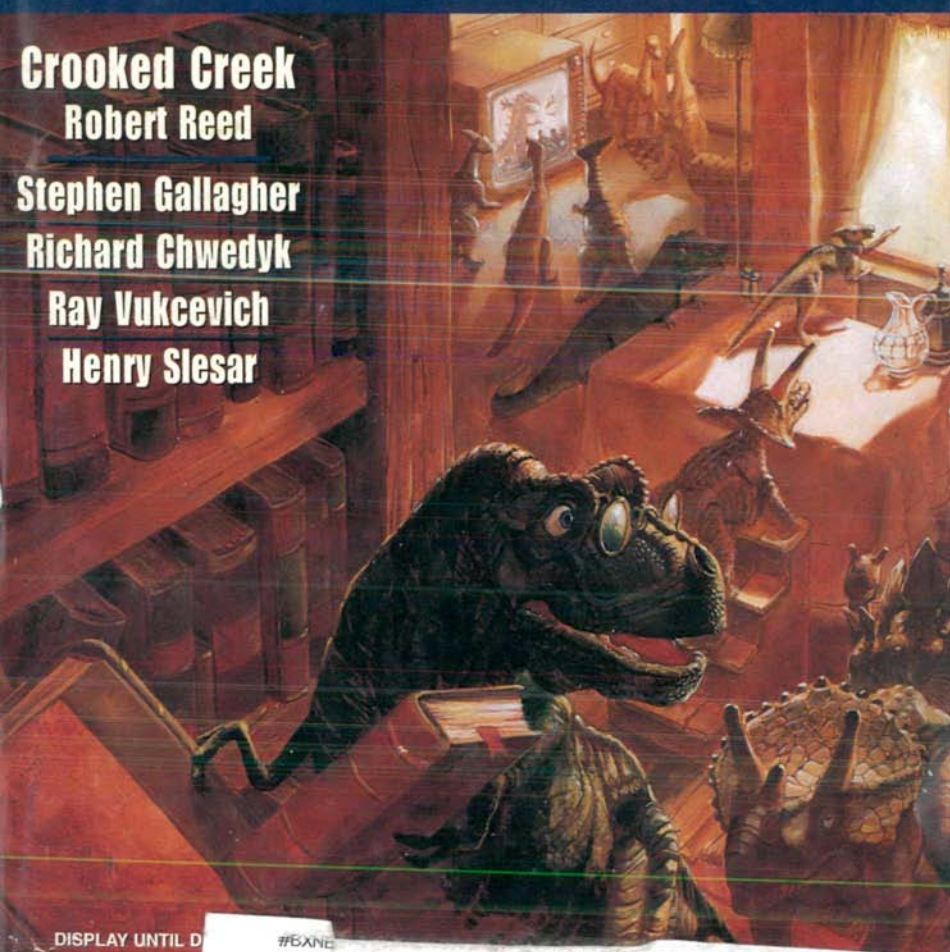

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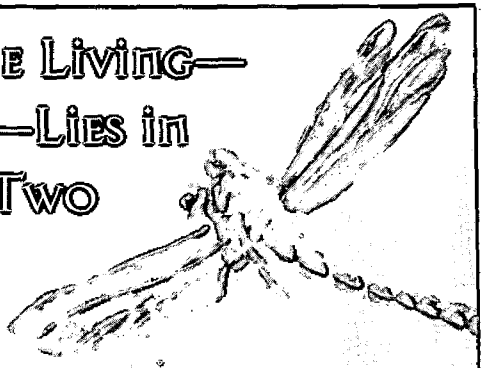

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In The Last Dinosaur Book, *W. J. T. Mitchell calls the terrible lizards "the most publicized animal image on the planet." As he demonstrates, dinosaurs have been embraced by popular culture for well over a century now, and the changes in image that the extinct reptiles have undergone often reflect social influences as much as they do scientific discoveries. Richard Chwedyk certainly seems to understand this point, as you'll soon see.*

Mr. Chwedyk lives in Chicago with his wife, poet Pam Miller. His last appearance here was "Auteur Theory" in our special Film Issue in July, 1998. He says this story owes a big debt to Tina Jens and to Algis Budrys.

The Measure of All Things

By Richard Chwedyk

Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the lamb make thee?
—William Blake

AXEL WAS THE FIRST TO SEE the car coming down the driveway from the main road. He stood on the table next to the picture window, where he always stands after breakfast, looking out at the woods, the sun (if it's out), the clouds (if it isn't), shifting his weight from one clumpy foot to the other, tail raised to balance himself against the slick, smooth surface. His mouth, as always, was wide open, displaying rows of benign teeth — benign compared to the predator he was modeled upon; and his tiny black eyes were alight with amazement, as always, as if he was witness to a secret miracle every moment.

"Huuuuuu-man!" he shouted. "Huuuu-man coming up the road!"

I had just finished cleaning up the kitchen, taking stock of the food supplies: plenty of pellets (some saurs still preferred them); another day's worth of collards and meat; and enough of the ever-essential oranges to

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last out the week. I needed more coffee, but since it was "human stuff" it took a lesser priority. A razor, too, would have been nice, and a new hairbrush. A pair of jeans wouldn't have hurt either, or at least another belt (I was losing a little weight), but I was getting off the subject of food. I drank my cold, leftover breakfast coffee with a touch of melancholy as I walked into the living room.

"Huuuuu-man!"

The room was bright. The windows were open. Rain was predicted for that night but just then you couldn't ask for more beautiful spring weather. Few saurs paid attention to Axel's alarm, since Axel, in his constant ebullience, often announced the arrival of alien battle cruisers, or warned us of approaching death rays, tidal waves (we are four hundred kilometers from the ocean), and Confederate Army divisions charging our house from out of the woods.

"Are you goofing around again, Axel?" Agnes said, her spiked tail and back plates upright in a guarded stance. "Because if you are — "

"Real," Axel insisted. "Real real real *real.* Big blue car coming down the driveway!" He pointed out the window with his tiny forepaw.

I walked over and confirmed the sighting: a dark blue Mercedes, the sort of car that's always been popular with young men who want to show the world that they've arrived. I wondered briefly if I'd ever wanted that: the sense of validation those wheels provided. I couldn't remember, but when I was a boy, like every other kid, I wanted everything.

"Is it the doctor?" Agnes asked.

"She's not due until this afternoon."

"It's not that horrible researcher, is it? The one who wants a tissue sample from Hetman."

"Researchers aren't Mercedes-type people," I assured her.

"*I'll* give him some tissue to sample!" She swung her tail back to demonstrate. Her battle-stance is less impressive when you consider that Agnes is forty centimeters long, her head is about the size of an apricot, and her tail spikes really wouldn't stand up in a fight.

"No," I said as I looked down at Axel and Axel looked up at me. "I think we have a visitor."

"Visitor!" Axel repeated in a whisper, as if he'd heard the word for the first time.

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He hadn't, of course. Visitors aren't frequent here, but they're certainly not unheard of. Delivery drivers come all the time. Dr. Margaret Pagliotti visits once a week. Folks from the Atherton Foundation stop by for regular inspections. But there *are* other visitors, people who come by just to see the saurs.

Most people these days hardly remember them. The smallest saur is no more than ten centimeters long. The largest one is a meter and a half tall. They're not "real" dinosaurs — that's another business altogether — but they *were* modeled after them, sometimes to painstaking detail, but more often to the cuter, cartoonish caricatures that children of many generations before wore on their pajamas or had printed on their lunchboxes and notebooks. They were an outgrowth of that vision of dinosaurs as cuddly buddies, friends to all children everywhere — moving, talking versions of the plush toys they've always played with.

That's what they were designed to be. That's why they were brought into the world. Forget for the moment that the manufacturers had plans to make enormous sums of money on them, at which they succeeded (several million were sold); forget also that the designers were trying to put forward their own subtle agenda: that bioengineering and its nanotech components could be safe and fun — cuddly, like a shoebox-sized triceratops — an agenda at which they were far less successful. Forget all that, at least for the moment.

To the saurs themselves, they had come into being to be friends, buddies, giving out love and receiving affection from appreciative girls and boys. That's what they were designed to do — that, and nothing else.

The designers fidgeted about for a name — they didn't like "life-toy," since it contained the troublesome "life" word. They didn't want the saurs confused with "animals," since that would place them under hundreds of government regulations. "Bio-toy" passed with all the marketing departments, so someone went out and wrote a definition of it: a toy modeled from bio-engineered materials, behaving without behavior, lifelike without being "alive."

The blue Mercedes parked in the gravel at the end of the driveway. I looked around our old Victorian-style house and its saurian occupants: the

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group gathered around the video screen watching a Buster Keaton film; little ones, mouse- and squirrel-sized guys riding across the living room on the battery-powered carts we call skates; in the dining room, another group of little ones were sitting before the big Reggiesystem computer, having a geography lesson (I could tell it was geography because I could hear them repeating the word "Togo" in unison); in another corner sat the Five Wise Buddhasaurs, blowing into their plastic horns; further back, in the library, I could see Diogenes and Hubert (two of the biggest guys, very tyrannosaurian) shelving books (yes, we still have books here, and even the saurs who can't read are fascinated by the illustrations, the type styles, even the little colophons); also in there was Hetman's bassinet-sized hospital bed, rolled over to the sunniest window.

Along with the usual furniture, scattered about were the hassocks and clever stair-step things the saurs use to get up on the furniture; the old wheelchair lift — adapted to meet the needs of the saurs — was in operation, transporting the little and the lame back and forth between first and second floors.

It's a world I've grown accustomed to, but one that many visitors find fairly startling, and some even find disturbing.

"Well," I said to everyone within earshot, "ready for a visitor?"

Most were indifferent to the prospect. Some jumped onto skates and rode off to other parts. Others climbed up on the chairs and couches, not wanting to be underfoot with a stranger in the house.

Charlie, a light brown badger-sized triceratops, hobbled away from the group around the video, accompanied by his beloved companion, Rosie, and headed for the lift. The designers, for all their mastery of eyes, ears, brains, and larynxes, had trouble with limbs, and it was hard to find a saur who didn't walk with at least a slight defect, though many limped for other reasons.

"If it's that Joe," Charlie called back to me, "tell him I'm not here. Tell him I'm dead."

Charlie has been saying this for years whenever visitors come by, even though in all that time not one of them has been named Joe.

"Humans," Agnes grumbled. "Idiots. I wish they'd all just leave us alone."

I noticed her mate, Sluggo, wasn't with her and I asked where he was.

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"Feeding squirrels. Feeding sparrows. He's always feeding someone, like some goddamned Saint Francis."

"He never feeds *us*," said Pierrot, a pint-sized theropod standing by the couch closest to the window, with his friend Jean-Claude, a dark green tyrannosur three times his height.

"Carnosaurs!" Agnes spat out the word with a resonance that belied her size. "Hopeless, brainless embarrassments!"

"I'm glad to see the lovely day has not affected Agnes's mood," said Doc, a light brown theropod just under a meter tall, with heavy-lidded eyes and a serene smile that makes you think he must have gotten into the liquor cabinet.

"That is her nature," I said to Doc as I brushed my hair back.

He sat on a plastic box over which he could drape his tail and rest his weary legs. Before him played two of the tiniest saurs in the house, named Slim and Slam. The two held a pen between them as if it were an enormous treetrunk and drew lines and curves on a sheet of paper spread before them.

"And nature," he replied, "we know, is a thing we shouldn't adjust without caution."

"I hate when you talk about me as if I can't hear!" Agnes thumped her tail against the floor.

"I meant to ask before," Doc said as he watched Slim and Slam at work/play, "did you sleep well?"

"Yes," I lied. I knew I'd had a nightmare but I couldn't remember any of the details. The best I could recall was a vague sense of hiding in a cramped, dark place. Perhaps I'd cried out in my sleep.

"You did?" The skin behind Doc's thick eyelids furrowed as he looked up at me.

"Of course. Why do you ask?"

"No reason." The deep voice took on a placating smoothness. "You look tired."

We heard the soft clip of a very expensive car door shutting outside.

"I'd better go out and greet our visitor," I said.

"Is the security on?" Agnes asked sharply.

"Of course. You *know* it's always on."

"Hmmph!" She positioned herself under the lamp table next to the couch. "Remember, I'm watching!"

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It was hardly a matter of remembering.

The visitor stood outside, reluctant, it seemed, to step onto the porch. He looked in his early thirties — a few years younger than myself, I figured — with an athletic build, light gray eyes, and strong facial features. His expression had that severity most professional people affect these days, with downward-bent forehead lines ending in a little 'V' between his eyebrows. He wore a dark blue sports jacket, light gray slacks, and a rose-colored shirt with the top button open.

It was all very acquired and practiced, as if he were living up to a model. But everyone out there in the real world acted that way. So would I, if I were out there.

"Look at that!" Axel shouted. "He's *bald!*"

He jumped up and down as I went to the door. "Take me with! Please! Please!"

"You'll have to behave yourself."

"Yes! Yes! Won't say a word. Just want to watch when he pulls out his mini-machine gun and starts shooting — du-du-du-du-du-du — right through the walls!"

Agnes groaned.

I picked Axel up and cradled him in my right arm. As I looked down at him, I couldn't help noticing the long scar down his back. It's been many years since that scar was made, but you could tell it had been a deep, nasty cut that left it.

Out on the porch, I said "Good morning," to the visitor. I must have looked a mess, but you can never dress for visitors because you never know when they're coming.

"Morning," he said with a deep, rehearsed voice. "You must be Groverton."

"That's me." I shifted Axel over to my left side and held out my hand. "Tom Groverton. And this is Axel."

Axel raised a forepaw and said "Hiya!" but the visitor ignored him. I shook hands with the man but he wouldn't tell me his name.

"You're looking for someone, aren't you? Most visitors are."

He spoke hesitantly, as if he wished he'd brought an attorney with him. "I don't really know if he's — "

"HIYA!" Axel tried again.

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" — here. I — we, my brother and I — had him when we were kids. There's not much chance of it, but I thought — "

"HIYA!"

The visitor looked at Axel at last and slightly bowed his head. " — I thought he might be up here."

I gestured for him to come up on the porch and sit down on the old bench. "Maybe you could give me a little description of him."

"He was — is, I guess — a stegosaur. Maybe thirty-five centimeters long. Orange on the top, mostly, and a kind of purple color on the bottom. Some patches of yellow between the orange and the purple. His plates were purple and a little orange at the center. His head is more beak-shaped than rounded off." He stood with his hands in the pockets of his slacks, refusing to sit on the bench. "My brother named him Elliot."

Axel made a hissing, gasping sort of sound. "Elliot!"

"A lot of saurs changed their names once we offered them shelter here." My mustache brushed my lower lip. "I can't keep track of whose name was given and whose was chosen, but we do have a saur here named Elliot who fits that description. Do you want to see him?"

"Yes!" His reply was so emphatic it seemed to startle him.

"You understand, I hope, that I'll first have to check with Elliot. Would you be disappointed if Elliot didn't want to see you?"

"I don't know." He returned to his previous, severe expression. "I don't understand a *lot* about this operation."

"The point," I said, "is this: many of these guys were extremely traumatized before they got here. Some of them were barely alive. You didn't have to have personally hurt him to remind him of days he'd rather not remember. That's why I need to check with Elliot first."

"I don't really understand." He tugged his slacks at the knees before finally taking a seat. "They're just toys, aren't they?"

"If that were true, would you be here?"

He looked away and exhaled with a hint of frustration. "Okay. Whatever."

I took him inside.

The visitor was surprised at the number of saurs gathered around the video screen. They were now watching Chaplin in *Modern Times*.

"How many you got here?"

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"Ninety-eight in this house, all counted, which isn't a lot considering how many were made. Some folks wonder why the foundation set up houses for the saurs. Why not reservations or preserves? They forget that saurs don't have a 'natural' environment other than a house. They were designed to be domestic."

And yet, when children tired of their saurs and stopped taking care of them, their parents drove them out to the woods or to parks and dumped them. It was worse than dumping cats or dogs: they at least had some vague instincts to work with. The saurs pretty much had to start from scratch, which is why so many of them starved, froze, were run over by vehicles or were eaten by predators.

I wondered if any of the saurs' designers ever imagined their creations would end up in a house like this. They had guaranteed the investors, the executives, and the buying public that the saurs were limited to a relatively few responses and reactions. They were supposed to be organic computers, and very simple ones at that. They could remember names and recognize faces, engage in simple conversations. They would sing the "Dinosaur Song" (a hideous thing that started "Yar-wooo, yar-wooo, yar-wooo/the dinosaurs love you — "), and if you told one you were sad he would know how to respond with a joke. Yes, the designers said, they were sophisticated creations, almost miraculous, a high point in what they had mastered by tweaking a few genes — but they were not to be confused with living things. They could respond to stimuli, they could retain data, but that doesn't make something a "living" thing, they said.

A bell rang in the library.

"Hetman! Hetman!" Axel squirmed around under my arm.

But just then I heard another commotion in the kitchen. Agnes was shouting. I excused myself from the visitor and entered the kitchen just in time to see Jean-Claude on the sink with Pierrot on his back, trying to open the freezer door.

"Hey!" Agnes shouted at them. "You idiots get down from there!"

"Honestly, guys." I helped the two of them back down onto the floor. "Couldn't you wait until lunch? You know you can't eat *uncooked* meat."

"Nooo," Pierrot corrected me. "We — were just — guarding, yeah — *guarding* the meat, in case the visitor tried to steal it!"

"I wish someone would steal *you*," Agnes grunted.

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"The visitor steals Pierrot!" Axel yelled. "He takes him and he throws him down a well — and he's falling-falling-falling — AAAAAAHHHHhhhh!"

"Look what you started," I said to Agnes.

"It was a bad idea to create carnosaurs," Agnes sighed. "It's meat. Meat equals stupid. It must be."

Jean-Claude and Pierrot ran out of the kitchen, Agnes went back to her hiding place, and Axel quieted down.

The visitor had moved on to the dining room when I returned. He watched the group gathered around the Reggiesystem computer. On the screen was an animated version of a rocket taking off, moving farther and farther away from the planet.

"Where is the spaceship going?" asked the steady, soft Reggiesystem voice.

The question set off a little conference among the gathered saurs. Tyrone, a hamster-sized theropod, bent over and listened as Alfie, his constant buddy, whispered to him.

"The *Walkuere* space station?" Tyrone replied.

"Correct." The Reggiesystem played a little synthesized melody. The other assembled saurs cheered.

The visitor watched, two fingers pressed against his lips.

"Some of the saurs are quite clever," I told him. "Some not so. Some can speak very well. Some can't. The problem is that you can't always assume which are which. Some saurs who can speak choose not to. Some are still too traumatized."

Axel waved to Alfie and Tyrone.

"They all seem hooked up in some way," the visitor observed, "like they have mates and children and whatever else. They're supposed to be asexual, aren't they?"

I shrugged. "These attachments they make to each other have baffled everyone who's studied them. Reproductively they're supposed to be neuter, but one saur will call another a spouse, or a parent, or an offspring, or a sibling, as if the need to establish familial connections transcends genetics. Who knows? Their designers know less about them now than when they first created them.

"Take their life span. They were supposed to live for five years, tops. Doc over there is twenty-eight. And Agnes under the table is twenty-five."

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"How dare you!" Agnes barked. "Tell him everything, why don't you?"

There *were* things I wouldn't mention to the visitor, or to anyone else. Like Bronte, sitting on the couch, warming the orphan bird eggs that Sluggo brings to her. Some of them hatch, and Sluggo feeds them — little robins and sparrows and finches — until they're big enough to fly from the window ledge.

And then there's the egg I found Bronte with the other day, the one that doesn't resemble any bird egg I've ever seen.

In the library, the visitor saw saurs reading, talking, listening to the radio. Fred and Ginger practiced a dance. The Five Wise Buddhasaurs hooked up their plastic horns to a synthesizer, so that their instruments sounded full-sized. Their cacophonies only occasionally coalesced into some charming harmonies.

Over in the far corner of the library, where the sun came through the windows most directly, Hetman rested on his little bed. Hermione, an apatosaur, stood nearby, watching over him.

"It's okay," she said. "A bad dream."

"S-s-orry," hissed Hetman. "I didn't mean to disturb anyone. I rang the bell in my sleep."

"Jesus," the visitor whispered as he got a look at Hetman.

Hetman's been in the little bed ever since he came here. His hind legs were crushed under some vehicle; his forelimbs were hacked off and his eyes burned out. No one thought he'd live more than a few days when he was found, if that, but he's been here many years now.

"Don't be sorry, Hetman," I said. "Someone is always here. Whatever you need, we'll get."

"I'm here!" Axel squirmed under my arm again. "I'll get for Het! I'll stay! Can I stay? Want me to stay with you, Hetman?"

"Yes, Axel," Hetman said with a raspy whisper. "Keep me from falling asleep again. Tell me once more all about the tidal wave."

I put Axel down next to Hetman.

The lines in the visitor's forehead looked deeper, the little 'V' looked liked it had been carved in.

"Who could *do* a thing like that?"

I didn't answer. Such questions, even when rhetorical, are meaningless.

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The saurs were sent out into the world with simple physiologies tha demanded a few food pellets, water, and a litter box. Sweet natures, a fev prepared phrases, a few songs. They were delivered into the hands o wealthy parents who bought them as much to show their neighbors the could afford them as to please their children. The children were told th saurs were toys and the children played with them like they were toys – which meant many of the saurs were suffocated, drowned, starved crushed, beaten, vivisected. I can go on for hours, cataloging cruelties tragedies, mistakes: how Hubert, tortured to the point of near madness decided to use his tyrannosaurian teeth and claws to defend himself anc was almost destroyed for it; how Diogenes had been shown a box of fooc pellets by the father who bought him and was told, "When these run out so do you." There were stories like that behind nearly every small strange-shaped, puzzled, puzzling face in this house.

Had I come from a more affluent background, would I have done the same? I felt too honest to answer either way.

I led the visitor upstairs.

"This place would drive me nuts," he said softly. "How could the people who made these things not know?"

He looked so appalled by what he'd seen of Hetman, I gave him the best answer I could think of for free. "In those days, designers thought of each little piece of the genome, each little element, as a symbol, like a letter printed on a wooden block. Each letter, they thought, had a simple denotative definition. When you placed the C next to the A and followed them with T, you could spell 'cat.' That it might all be a little more complicated didn't occur to them."

The visitor took the stairs slowly, carefully reviewing each step. "So, these engineers learned their lesson, huh?"

"They think so."

We passed the dark little bedroom where Tibor keeps his cardboard castle. It's really quite a shambles, but Tibor, a runt of an apatosaur with a stern Beethoven-like face, sits there all day and hatches Napoleonic schemes. On the other side of the room sits a cardboard box on a dresser which Geraldine, another runt, calls her "lab." Nothing has happened with any of her experiments so far, but I keep two fire extinguishers in the room anyway.

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Elliot and his mate, Syrena, a bright red stegosaur, hang out in a bedroom on the second floor with Preston, a chunky, round-headed theropod.

"If you could wait here a moment," I said to the visitor, "I'll check with Elliot."

Preston worked away slowly but determinedly on a computer keyboard with his tiny two-digit-each forepaws. I described the visitor to Elliot and asked if he'd mind seeing him. He thought for a moment, looking to Syrena for advice.

"It must be Danny," Elliot said, his voice so soft it would make a whisper sound like an outcry. "I told you about him. Danny never did anything bad to me, except — leave me."

He pressed closer to his mate and rubbed his face against hers. "I'll see him, if he wants to see me."

When I brought the visitor in he was momentarily distracted by Preston at his keyboard. He read over his shoulder:

> "By dawn the crowd in the Plaza had swelled to ten thousand. The Ambassador had an excellent view of the frenzied multitude from his window. They all wore their red bandannas and stoked the air above them with their banners, chanting that the world of Lorair was their birthright..."

"This is his eighth novel," I told the visitor.

"He *publishes* them?"

"Not under his own name."

But then he saw Elliot, and his old expression completely evaporated. It seemed to reveal, maybe for the first time in years, a wound as deep as the scar on Axel's back.

"Elliot?"

"Danny?"

The visitor bent down until his head was nearly resting on the desk's mahogany top.

"Been a long time," the visitor mumbled.

Elliot nodded apprehensively.

The visitor looked up at me first, then at the other saurs in the room.

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"Would it — " he started, "Is there somewhere Elliot and I could talk alone for a little while?"

I gestured to the others and helped them out into the hallway. "It won't be for long," I said to them. And to Elliot: "We'll be right outside if you need anything."

As I shut the door I looked down to see Agnes staring up at me, her expression as hard as a Brazil nut.

"It's all right," I told her. "Nothing's going to happen."

I hoped I was right. That was my responsibility: to make sure nothing happened. Agnes kept looking at me. Her tail tapped against the floor. Behind her gathered a number of curious saurs, including all the biggest guys: Doc, Diogenes, Hubert, and Sam.

"Nothing will happen," said Doc, staring coolly at the closed door. "If it does, it won't be without someone feeling great regret."

I knew that "someone" didn't mean me, but still my breathing quickened.

The saurs waited quietly, except for Agnes, still thrumming with her tail.

When the door finally opened it did so slowly. The visitor came out, looking a little flushed, his skin a little shinier.

"Hey, Elliot!" Agnes shouted back into the room. "You all right?"

I wiped some sweat from my brow and escorted the visitor back to his Mercedes. He said nothing until he got back into his car.

"Thanks." That was it.

He drove off and hasn't been back, not so far. That's how it usually goes.

A week later, the Atherton Foundation received an anonymous donation of ten thousand dollars, directed to this particular house. That too is how it usually goes.

When I went back upstairs, all the saurs had dispersed save for Agnes, tail raised as if she might be considering giving me a whack with it just for good measure.

Elliot was still on the desk, right where I'd left him with the visitor. Next to him was a little plastic figure, a soldier in uniform and helmet, the type that comes in a big toy set. The visitor must have brought it — and left it there.

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"What is that?" I asked.

"It's Sarge," Elliot said with his whispering voice, not taking his eyes off the little figure. "He used to leave it by my box when he went to school. 'This is Sarge,' he told me back then. 'Now you have a toy to play with too.' I thought of Sarge as a little figure of him, of Danny, the boy who owned — who I stayed with. Danny had me, and I had Danny, or Sarge, that is. When things got bad, before I was taken away, I hid Sarge, slipped him into a heating vent through a loose grate. I thought that if they were going to hurt me they might want to hurt Sarge too. I wonder if he's been in there all these years."

"Maybe," I said. "Maybe Danny just found him, and that's why he came today."

"It was silly of me, wasn't it? To hide Sarge like that?"

I shook my head. "Not silly at all." I bent down to look at Sarge from the same eye level as Elliot. "What should we do with him?"

"I don't know." Elliot twisted his head a little to one side and then to the other. "Could we put him in the museum? If I change my mind we could bring him down again. At least I'll always know where he is."

"The museum" is just a room in the attic. It's not very big, but it's loaded with shelves, and on the shelves are hundreds of toys: dolls, drums, ray guns, puzzles, wooden figures and plastic vehicles. There are also neckties, handkerchiefs, hats, vests, photographs, notes, tempera paintings on cardboard, little books bound with yarn. Everything in the room was left by one visitor or another for one saur or another. Over the years, it's grown into quite a collection.

I carefully picked up Elliot with one hand and, just as carefully, picked Sarge up with the other. "We'll take him there now, and you can pick out a place for him yourself."

Agnes moved out of the way as I came by with Elliot and Sarge. Sluggo rolled an orange to her and the sweet smell of the fruit distracted her at last.

That afternoon, Dr. Margaret Pagliotti stopped by on one of her regular visits. She's fairly young, with long brown hair and lovely, dark, Mediterranean eyes. She ran down a checklist, looking over each of the ninety-eight saurs, asking if any had been feeling ill, not getting enough

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to eat, subject to any changes in mood or behavior. Dr. Margaret is nothing if not thorough, and she has the necessary sense of humor one needs when dealing with the saurs.

When Agnes grumbles and complains, Dr. Margaret holds her by the forelimbs and kisses her on the snout. That leaves Agnes speechless and, for the most part, agreeable.

I mentioned Hetman's nightmares to her, since Hetman would never mention them himself, along with my suspicion that he might be experiencing more pain.

"Speaking of nightmares — " I thought about the night before but cut myself off. " — forget it." It was "human stuff," after all, like the coffee.

Before Dr. Margaret was even two meters from his bed, Hetman called out, "My angel is here. How are you, Doctor?"

"How are *you*, old friend?" She bent down and caressed his snout.

"A little tired," he answered. "A little sleepless. I don't complain. When you come a miracle happens and I'm instantly cured."

Did I mention that Dr. Margaret has a lovely blush?

She examined Hetman carefully and asked him if he might want some stronger painkillers.

"No," he whispered. "Not if they dull my senses. I have so few left."

"I'll leave the prescription with Tom. You can try a half dose. If they're too strong you don't have to take them."

"Thank you. As long as I have angels here I'm in no great hurry for heaven."

Dr. Margaret asked to see me in private, so we went up to my room.

"I got another call from that researcher from Toyco."

"You too? I'd offer you some coffee but we're almost out." I went over to my desk but, like the visitor earlier, found myself reluctant to sit down. "Anyway, Toyco had their chance. I don't see why they need any more samples."

Dr. Margaret sat on the top of my desk and stared out at the afternoon shadows in the yard. "I hear it has to do with the saurs' longevity. They're back into immortality research."

I glanced up at the ceiling. "Wonderful."

"Or it may be something else they hadn't anticipated." She spoke softly, as if we might be overheard.

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"Such as?"

"I saw Bronte's egg."

I walked over to the window as if to stare out but I can't remember really looking at — or seeing — anything.

I was recalling, for the first time in years, a trip I'd taken with my mother, to one of the big, fancy department stores in one of the old-fashioned malls. Maybe it was something about Dr. Margaret that reminded me of my mother.

In the toy section were about a dozen gray stegosaurs of Sluggo's size housed in a colorful pen. The "Dinosaur Song" spilled out of speakers at each of the pen's corners: "Yar-woooo! Yar-woooo!"

The saurs huddled together apprehensively until a salesperson walked by and shouted at them.

"Smile!" she said. "No one's going to buy you if you don't smile!"

They were accidental or deliberate failures at the task, and when a little girl in blonde curls and a red coat picked up one of the saurs with her sweaty pink hand I clearly saw the expressions on the little gray faces, the one taken and the others remaining: the agony of loss and separation.

When my mother noticed me looking at the saurs she gently tugged me away. "Forget it, Tommy. We couldn't afford one in a million years and you'd never take care of it anyway. Remember what happened to your iguana."

The first part didn't bother me. My parents were honest in their poverty and never used it as a crutch or a badge of honor. The second part hurt because I did my best to take care of the iguana. What hurt about it most was that my parents, fair as they were in many ways, could not help but remind me of my every failure and see in them the genetic imprint of my future.

But what struck me just then, as I recalled this scene, was how I ignored what she said. I looked up at her seriously, even with a bit of reproach, and told her, "I wouldn't buy *one*. I'd buy them *all*, so they could stay together."

I took a little satisfaction, remembering that moment, in seeing past the delusion of those days, and proving my mother wrong. Not only could I take care of a saur, I could take care of ninety-eight of them.

"Tom?" Margaret waved her hand in front of my eyes.

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"Sorry. You were saying?"

"I said, there's something else I'm worried about."

"What's that?"

"You," she said, looking at me with all her medical precision. "You spend so much time here, with the saurs. I'm not sure if that's good for you. I'm not sure it's good for anyone."

She looked at me seriously, sadly, as if I'd already said something to hurt or disappoint her. In that moment she reminded me even more of my mother, which made it even harder for me to answer.

"I'm happy here, Margaret." I touched her hand. "I don't know why. Any explanation I could give you beyond that would be something I made up. I feel at home here. I feel I'm with friends."

Worry lines marred her forehead, which was the last thing I wanted, so I changed the subject back to my dwindling supply of coffee.

If she continued to worry she never said a word about it to me. But I'm still not sure if — when she showed me that grave expression — it was for something more than myself she worried.

AFTER DINNER, some of the saurs sat in the living room, watching a production of *Turandot* on the video. Between acts, Axel demonstrated how to fall off a couch and onto a pillow, backwards, perhaps a few too many times.

"Suddenly, a hole opens up underneath me! A hole in space and time! And I'm falling-falling-*falling*-FALLING-*FALLING!* AAAAaaaahhh!"

During the finale of *Turandot,* some of the saurs joined in with the chorus — not that they knew the words, but they followed the melody with open vowels.

In the library, The Five Wise Buddhasaurs took over the stereo and played Louis Armstrong recordings for several hours. They love his voice, his cornet, and the sheer elation one finds in both. They're convinced he's one of them: a joyful saurian angel.

Sluggo told the little ones some more tales of Sauria and the heroic voyages of the brave saurs who returned to their homeland.

"And do you know why they sailed to Sauria?" Agnes queried the little ones after the story.

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Those who could speak answered "Humans!" mostly because that was the answer Agnes wanted to hear.

"Humans!" Agnes nodded. "Messing up everything! Messing up the whole damn world!"

"Foo!" the little ones chanted, at Agnes's direction. "Foo! Humans! Foo!"

I sat in the library, reading to Hetman and a few dozen saurs gathered around. The book was Hetman's choice, *The Deluge*, by Henryk Sienkiewicz.

"I wonder why they come." Charlie interrupted my reading, still distracted by the morning visit. "What do they think they're going to get? Forgiveness? Peace of mind? Wouldn't they be happier if they forgot all about us? I would."

"No, Charlie," Hetman said, breathing heavily. "You don't forget. As painful as the memories are, forgetting is dying. And, in the measure of all things, nothing that truly lives truly wants to die."

Later that evening, the storm clouds moved in. Even the most intelligent and reasonable of the saurs get unsettled by the lightning and thunder. Someone suggested jokingly that it was an ancient memory of the great comet, but if so then we all have a trace of that ancient memory.

At bedtime all the saurs gather in the large bedroom upstairs. The little ones who get confused are aided by the bigger fellows. Even Hetman is brought up and wheeled over on his little bed. I check around for the stragglers and the lost under lamp tables, the bottom shelves of the bookcases, behind bedposts and in odd little corners. Every now and then, after I've turned out the lights and crawled into my own bed, I'll hear one that I've missed crying out softly. I'll follow the cries and find him or her — in the cabinet under the bathroom sink, stranded on the desk in the library — and carry the little one back to the bedroom.

It's true, just like in Andrew Ulaszek's poem, "On the Island Where the Dinosaurs Live," they sleep in a kind of huddle, the biggest in the center, the smaller ones crammed around them:

> "...conjoined, in outlandish sprawl,
> a pile of plated backs,
> spiny heads and coiled tails."

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Whether they do it to "swim within the same dream," as that same poem informs us, I cannot know. The least social of them join in the huddle, even though there are many places to sleep in the old house. Tibor leaves his cardboard castle. Geraldine slips out of her secret laboratory. Doc, Diogenes, and Hubert take out the big blankets and comforters to spread over the amassed group.

Bronte brought the egg up on a skate packed with cotton.

That night, the house shook with each rumble of thunder. Bright blue flashes intruded through every window. I checked their bedroom before turning in. The blankets twitched with every flash of light. When I put my hand on them I could feel the shudders from underneath, like the erratic tremors of an old car engine.

"I'm all right," — Agnes's voice, stern, to cover her anxiety, as she pressed herself more closely to Sluggo. "It's all right. It's — I know it's stupid."

"The thunder scares me too," I said.

"It's stupid. I can't help it."

I looked elsewhere, not wanting to add to her embarrassment. Charlie, with Rosie pressed against him, twitched in his sleep. Pierrot was rolled up in a little ball between Jean-Claude and Bronte. Tyrone wrapped his meager forearm around Alfie, who stared up with his huge, ever-frightened eyes as the terrible light bounced against the walls and brought the shadows to life.

"Big storm!" Axel smiled, mouth wide open as he trembled. "Big, big storm! Everything blows up! Brrroooommm!"

"*For God's sake* — !" Agnes groaned.

"Yes. A very big storm." I stroked Axel's head until he lowered himself into the cushion of companions.

"There is always fear," Doc said, his smooth voice almost as deep as the thunder.

"Yes," I replied.

"No matter how big the big ones get, there is always something bigger to fear."

"I know."

A long hissing breath escaped from his nostrils and was lost in the low rumble of thunder. "Good night, my friend."

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"Good night, my friend."

I went back to my bed but couldn't fall asleep. The storm was fierce, with no sign of subsiding, but it was more than the light and noise that kept me up.

I'm not a morbid person, but I thought about death — or more precisely, how strangely tilted our view of life is. We know the universe went on before for billions of years and it will go on for billions more. There's just this brief stretch when the window is opened before our eyes, and the world is visible. Then the window is shut, forever.

I lay in bed, breathing short breaths, unable *not* to imagine my last moment. Will I scream in panic when it comes? Or will I manage to utter one last farewell?

There was no getting past the "human stuff" — and it was all human stuff, from God to the saurs to whatever had made both.

Everything but the storm.

The thunder pealed and roared until I could hear the loose change on the dresser rattle with the vibrations. And then, from the saurs' room, I heard one voice.

Perhaps Sluggo, perhaps Tyrone, perhaps a saur I would have least expected, but he or she sang one clear phrase with that nonsense dinosaur word: "Yar-woooo!"

And sang it again: "Yar-wooo!"

The third time, the other saurs joined in: a few at first, then more. It was the old song, the lullaby they had been trained and designed to sing in the innocent days when they sprang forth from the lab/factories. It reminded me of old fieldworkers singing slave songs generations after abolition. But even the most insubstantial melody can have a certain power. The urge to sing is stronger than any song. They were taught to sing it for their owners. Now they sang it for themselves.

I listened as they sang against the unrelenting thunder, and then I joined in, with my own croaky voice, with the same nonsense dinosaur word — "Yar-wooo!"

"Yar-wooo!"

I sang with them until the thunder subsided and sleep took us all at last, even Axel.

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

The Bottoms, by Joe R. Lansdale, Subterranean Press, 2000, $150. Slipcased hardcover.

LAST YEAR Subterranean Press published one of my favorite Joe Lansdale books: *The Boar*. (Until this most recent novel, it sat there at the head of the list with *The Magic Wagon*, my other favorite Lansdale.) *The Boar* is set in East Texas during the depression, a coming-of-age story of a boy who wants to be a writer, but sets out instead with a young friend to hunt down a massive boar that's been terrorizing his parents' farm and the surrounding area. It was written in a somewhat colloquial first person voice and far from the one-note theme my brief description above might imply, it's a novel of great heart and inspired writing.

The Bottoms, set in the same area and time period (and sharing a cameo with the protagonists of *The Boar*), has much the same sensibility of that earlier novel, except the stakes are raised considerably.

Again, the protagonist is a boy. His name's Harry Collins and he lives on a dirt-poor farm with his parents and his tomboy sister Thomasina, called Tom. The story opens with their dog Toby getting his back broken while hunting a squirrel. Harry and Tom set off into the woods with the dog in a wagon and rifle to put him out of his misery. But the dog, for all its pain, is still eager to point out squirrels, and the children decide to let him have his last hunt, pulling Toby on the wagon, deeper and deeper into the woods, as he points out one squirrel after the other for them.

They go a long ways, night comes, and they realize they have to get back home. On the way they come upon the corpse of a dead black woman, bound in wire and mutilated, and have a frightening encounter with a shadowy figure that appears to have horns that

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they're sure is the dreaded Goat Man who's said to haunt the Bottoms.

It turns out the dead woman is the first of a number of victims of what we, with our unhappy present knowledge of the phenomenon, would call a serial killer. Besides farming and running a barber shop, Harry's father is the town constable, so it's up to him to lead the investigation. Unfortunately, he's woefully unprepared for the job, and things go from bad to worse.

Like *The Boar*, this too is a coming-of-age story, but the two boys are very different, and the murdering human (that Harry and Tom remain convinced is the Goat Man) is a much nastier antagonist than the feral boar of the first book. One can at least understand the animal's rage and avoid it. When a human goes feral, there is no avoiding the consequences — especially when his or her identity is unknown.

In expressive and evocative prose, Lansdale writes tellingly of life in the depression, racism, and the character of the men and women trying to eke out a life for themselves in the poverty-stricken Bottoms of East Texas. There are grim sections to this book, certainly, but it's also full of life and heart and I'd recommend it to anyone, though I'd also recommend you wait for the less expensive trade edition which I hope will be available by the time you read this. The Subterranean Press edition is certainly a beautifully made book, but at $150 a pop, it's for die-hard collectors only.

Blood Dance, by Joe R. Lansdale, Subterranean Press, 2000, $40.

And speaking of *The Magic Wagon* (as I did briefly above), while *Blood Dance* isn't the prequel to

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that book as some of the publisher's advertising might lead you to believe, it does share a certain sensibility with that classic novel. Set in the old west of gunfighters and gold rushes, it paints an evocative portrait of veterans of the Civil War, Custer's Last Stand, and has a wonderfully eerie and mythically resonant sequence set during a Sun Dance ceremony.

However, even with that fantastical element, this is a true western novel and not really aimed at the fantasy enthusiast. But having grown up myself reading Louis L'Amour and Max Brand, I loved it.

Great western art, mostly pencil, by Mark A. Nelson.

High Cotton: Selected Stories of Joe R. Lansdale, by Joe R. Lansdale, Golden Gryphon Press, 2000, $23.95.

At the risk of over-saturating this column with Lansdale content, I'd still be remiss not to make at least a brief mention of this new collection. Here are the stories that built Lansdale's reputation as one of the most audacious writers to come out of the eighties. You'll find his dark-as-midnight humor in "Steppin' Out, Summer, '68," just plain dark stories like "Tight Little Stitches in a Dead Man's Back," and even sick puppies (pun intended) such as "My Dead Dog, Bobby."

Though they were peers at the time, Lansdale was never one of the Splatterpunk writers. The stories here are certainly as in-your-face and graphic as those of the self-proclaimed Splatterpunks, but rather than going for a simple gross-out, these stories exist to explore the heart of darkness, more specifically the depths to which we will inflict it upon each other and to what lengths we'll go to escape it.

While I'll recommend *The Bottoms* to anyone interested in great American storytelling, and *Blood Dance* to those who love a western, *High Cotton* is only for the strong at heart, the fearless reader who can face its powerful subject matter as unflinchingly as did the author.

In the Garden of Unearthly Delights: The Paintings of Josh Kirby, text by Nigel Suckling, Paper Tiger, 2000, $21.95.

This is a reprint of a book that was originally published back in 1991 by Dragon's World Ltd. The paintings are brash, cartoony and highly colorful (or as Brian Aldiss says in his foreword, "Yellow ogre"),

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and as dense with figures as anything by Hieronymus Bosch. Fans of Terry Pratchett will immediately recognize Kirby as the cover artist for the Discworld books and he's also done a lot of work for role-playing game companies, covers for books by Craig Shaw Gardner, Ron Goulart, and others, as well as the poster for Monty Python's *Life of Brian*.

But as you explore this collection more closely, you soon discover that Kirby's far from a one-note artist. His technique runs from tight renderings with the figures almost outlined to loose painterly images where the brush strokes are as much a part of the design as the rest of the painting's elements. The subject matter can get quite dark as well, or darkly whimsical, as in his series of Alfred Hitchcock portraits where stories seem to come alive on Hitchcock's facial features.

It's certainly commercial art, but at least Kirby has his own flair and unique vision, as opposed to far too many other artists in the genre, each barely distinguishable from the other.

Enchanted World: The Art of Anne Sudworth, text by John Grant, Paper Tiger, 2000, $29.95.

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Much is made of the fact that Anne Sudworth's work is Fine Art rather than illustration, with the distinction rather strongly hinted that illustration is somewhat of a poor cousin to Fine Art. Normally that would annoy me, but as I went through the book I became more amused instead since the weakest work to be found here are Sudworth's paintings with figures (her wizards and fairies), fantastical creatures (dragons, unicorns), and her few book covers (for a number of Storm Constantine novels)...in other words, the more illustrative work. Her biographer John Grant

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shouldn't toss stones from inside the glass house of his text.

But with that said, I have to admit that Sudworth's arboreal paintings and her landscapes — particularly their skies — are quite stunning. There's little fantastical in either (for all that both Sudworth and Grant appear to think that they're the embodiment of what fantasy art should be), but they are fascinating, and while they could certainly serve as the backdrop for any fantasy painting, they work very well as they stand. The trees in the arboreal paintings are especially striking with the strong light that appears to pour right out of their bark.

Also present are a handful of figurative works that are more mainstream (horse races, riders, etc.). Oddly, considering the weakness of the fantasy figures, these are far more satisfying in terms of technique and overall design.

Grant's text is a little gushy in places; one quickly gets the idea Sudworth is his favorite artist — nothing wrong with that, of course, though it does get a little tiresome. But happily most of the text concentrates on the origins of the art and Sudworth's techniques, with sidebars of Sudworth's own commentaries and fascinating snippets of folk and fairy lore.

Enchanted World isn't really successful as a whole, but I'd recommend it on the strength of the arboreal paintings alone. Anyone who appreciates trees will love the ones that Sudworth has brought to life with her evocative pastels.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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BOOKS

ROBERT K.J. KILLHEFFER

The Wild Machines: The Book of Ash #3, by Mary Gentle, Avon Eos, 2000, $6.99.

Lost Burgundy: The Book of Ash #4, by Mary Gentle, Avon Eos, 2000, $6.50.

The King's Peace, by Jo Walton, Tor, 2000, $26.95.

The Angel and the Sword, by Cecelia Holland, Forge, 2000, $23.95.

WE'RE living now in a post-feminist world. Not long ago I went to my first live WNBA game. I've been a huge fan from the start, cheering on my hometown New York Liberty (the "Libs"), but it wasn't until I sat at Madison Square Garden watching them live, surrounded by a roaring Liberty crowd, that the full force of what was happening reached me.

These were female basketball players — professional female basketball players — scrambling around the famous Garden court. But that wasn't the truly striking thing. More thrilling than the fact of their playing was how they played — physically, aggressively, roughly, all-out, sweaty and bruised and never giving an inch. Not the slightest sign of demure "femininity," and yet my Libs were nothing if not feminine. Gloriously feminine, tough, gritty athletes.

But even that wasn't the most notable thing. All around me in the stands there were women, alone and in groups, with boyfriends or girlfriends, mothers with daughters, teenagers in clusters, hooting and hollering and carrying on. Raucous female fans watching hard-nosed female basketball players compete like gladiators.

And it was no big deal.

That's what made it so wonderful: It was no big deal. This wasn't some consciousness-raising

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exercise; these mothers weren't instructing their daughters in the fine points of gender politics; this was not a demonstration. This was just plain everyday life.

It's not that feminism is dead, or has lost relevance — there's still plenty of work to be done — but many of the things for which feminism has fought have not only come to be, they're largely unremarkable. There are girls and boys growing up today who will be surprised to learn that it was ever considered inappropriate (or even impossible) for women to do anything that men do. A post-feminist world bears the unique imprint of a feminist past.

Like the WNBA, or a Republican National Convention at which the hope for a female president is openly declared, Mary Gentle's rich and wild Ash series (originally published as a single 1100-page volume in the UK) would be impossible to imagine in anything but a post-feminist context. This tale of a nail-tough female mercenary captain in an alternate 15th-century Europe begins (in its first volume, *A Secret History*) with an unflinching feminist flair: "It was her scars that made her beautiful." And the opening scene, in which the eight-year-old Ash kills her two adult male rapists, seems cut and sewn to fit a novel centered on gender politics But Gentle doesn't make a lesso out of her story, or out of her color ful, fallible Ash. She doesn't fee the need. Her female soldier need no more ideological support thar the Liberty guard Theresa Weather spoon. Ash is free to be a complex contradictory person rather than ar icon of identity politics.

When the third volume — *The Wild Machines* — opens, the armies of the Visigoth Empire have stormed through Europe, bringing with them a deadly blight: the absence of the sun, a permanent darkness. All that stands between them and complete conquest is the duchy of Burgundy, and the city of Dijon, wherein Duke Charles the Bold and his remaining forces are beseiged by the Visigoths. Ash has fled Carthage — the Visigoth capital city — with her mercenary company, having learned that the Visigoth invasion is driven by the ambitions of the "Wild Machines," computer-like intelligences that have grown in the sandstone monuments of the Tunisian desert. They seek more than conquest; they hope to bring about the complete extermination of humankind, and if Burgundy falls, the sun will shine no more, and humanity will be wiped out.

This drama remains the center

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of focus throughout *The Wild Machines* and the final volume, *Lost Burgundy*, as Gentle works the desperate tension of the siege with a handful of well-turned twists and surprises. Just as she did in her earlier novels, *Rats and Gargoyles* (1990) and *The Architecture of Desire* (1991), Gentle enriches her story with a sensual, tactile, masterfully detailed setting; the story's a stimulating blend of history and fantasy the reader can practically smell. I have rarely if ever encountered a more convincing portrayal of premodern warfare.

Given such a grounding in historical realities, issues of gender do inevitably crop up. (Being post-feminist doesn't mean ignoring such matters, it just means approaching them differently.) So we have Ash the mercenary captain, hated by some for her unconventional vocation and unladylike manners, but it's hardly Ash against the world. For every occasion on which Ash endures someone's disdain, there are two or three moments when her crew or her warrior peers proclaim their untroubled acceptance, fervent regard, even awe. We meet another female *condottiere* in charge of her own company, and Ash's platoon has a healthy share of female soldiers sprinkled through it. Even the Visigoth armies are led by a female general known as the Faris (who happens to be Ash's twin — I won't explain).

Despised though she sometimes is, Ash herself is no paragon of tolerance. She's as quick to sneer at battlefield cowardice as any of her male counterparts, and she's perplexed and even a little disgusted when she learns that her long-time camp surgeon is actually a woman in disguise — and a lesbian. (Ash does defend the woman, though, when some even less tolerant folk try to burn the doctor.) Ash is most unlike, say, the female warriors of Suzy McKee Charnas's landmark Holdfast novels, who combine fierce combative prowess with a deep sense of sisterhood and a nobility of spirit unmatched among men, and who inhabit a world in which male and female are locked in literal war. Ash's allegiances care nothing for gender — she's as attached to the men under her command as the women, and but for Floria (the surgeon) all her closest companions are male.

If there's any consistent thread of gender-related commentary to be teased from the Ash books, it's very different from the starkly polarized views of the feminist classics. Ash declares in *The Wild Machines* that "War makes nothing"

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of the distinction between men and women, and Ash herself is the manifest proof. She suffers from the horrors of battle and the lonely responsibility of command like any male commander would, and she hasn't found a way to make war any less devastating because of her gender. (At one point she and the Faris exchange thoughts on the subject directly: The Visigoth general ridicules the notion that men, naturally less sensitive, endure the trials of war more easily than women. Her *qa'ids*, she says, can "tell this Frankish knight how much *easier* it is for a man to stand covered in the brains and blood of his dearest friend.")

If anything, the men around Ash seem to suffer even more than she does. The character of Ash argues plainly for the essential similarity of men and women, and for the view that taking on the roles of men might not be the best goal of a feminist revolution. War is no better with female commanders, and some jobs aren't fit for man nor woman to hold.

Though such matters will — and should — occur to the reader of the Ash books, they remain for the most part implicit, items to be observed amid the clatter and roar of the action-filled plot and a narrative fabric of rare complexity. Gentle adds a layer of extra interest by framing the account of Ash's life as the (rather loose) translation of several disparate ancient documents by a pioneering historian. We're treated to interludes during which the historian and his editor discuss the increasingly unsettling implications of the events recorded in the "Ash texts" — what starts out seeming like a literary conceit or medieval imprecision becomes ever more undeniably a different history from the one we (and they) recall. And as the series progresses these interludes themselves take on greater significance. By the end, Gentle has turned her immensely engaging historical fantasy into a thoughtful science fiction novel based on the fringier speculations of contemporary physics.

The Ash books (or book) are a stunning achievement, an example of the best that the genre can produce — rich in action and event, wonderfully inventive, erudite but never dull, with plenty for a thoughtful reader to chew on after the page-turning frenzy is over. With Ash, Mary Gentle has given us the first great fantasy of the '00s.

Jo Walton's first novel, *The King's Peace*, reworks Arthurian legend and the little we know about

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the true "Arthurian" period (the late-fifth and sixth centuries) into something less familiar, creating an imaginary world very much like Britain in that chaotic time between the withdrawal of the Romans and the rise of relatively stable Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. Here it's the "Vincans" who once ruled "Tir Tanagiri" before pulling out in the face of increasing barbarian pressure on the frontiers. Ireland is Tir Isanagiri, and the Holy Land is Sinea, where the White God once walked as a man. For the figure of Arthur, the war leader who unites the British tribes against their common enemy (here the "Jarns" rather than Angles and Saxons), Walton gives us Urdo. By and large, Walton's imagined world is simply our own renamed.

With so much running closely parallel, it's easy to expect the storyline to adhere to the Arthurian pattern, but Walton wisely follows the well-worn path only in general outline. Urdo battles invaders from across the Channel, as well as petty kings in his own territory, and he gathers about him a core of great warriors. He wins a telling battle which gains at least a brief reprieve for Tir Tanagiri. His scheming half-sister Morwen certainly brings to mind Morgan le Fay. And we meet an Irish knight whose illicit love of a young Irish princess married to the ruler of what in our world would be Cornwall reminds us not a little of Tristan's doomed affair with Ysolde. But Walton centers her story on young Sulien ap Gwien, one of Urdo's warriors who bears no obvious resemblance to any character of Arthurian legend — not least because she's a woman.

Walton kicks her story off — after a brief prologue — with Sulien returning to her family home to find it burned and pillaged by raiders. Before she can determine what's become of her kin, she encounters the raiders themselves, who subdue and rape her, dedicating her as a sacrifice to one of their gods and leaving her for dead. Walton quickly establishes rich ground for the plot to grow on, as Sulien leaves home to become a warrior, discovers she's pregnant by her rapists, and while convalescing in a monastery after the birth encounters the witchy Queen Morwen, who tries to kill her. After that, though, the pace and structure of the narrative slacken. There's still plenty going on, but scenes often shift just when they should linger, foreshadowings tend to bear little fruit, and more time is spent on describing people's features and clothing than on their thoughts or motives.

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The best parts of *The King's Peace* come in the interstices. Each chapter begins with an epigraph, a fragment of verse or prayer or chronicle that sheds a little light on the societies that are mixing and clashing up on stage. We get a bit from the heroic poem "Lew Rosson's Hall," a Tanagan charm for purifying water, and a paragraph from the Vincan historian Marcia Antonilla's *The Third Malmish War.* Walton does an excellent job of mimicking the styles and cadences of Celtic and Anglo-Saxon poetry — her chief inspirations — and for any reader familiar with those sources her epigraphs are a delight. Even for readers without such background they provide vital color and mood that's too often missing from the main text.

The King's Peace also shines when Walton brings us into contact with the old gods, whether in their realms or among mortals. She evokes these mysterious powers elegantly, communicating both their fearsome strangeness and their relationships with the human world with rare skill and understatement. If only the scenes without gods had shown the same deft touch.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of *The King's Peace,* though, is the social system it portrays. From Tir Isanagiri to the far city of Caer Custenn (our Byzantium), men and women enjoy what appears to be near-total equality. (Only among the Jarns are women significantly oppressed.) As a result, there's hardly any sign of gender conflict or strife. Many women do play the role of housekeeper ("key keeper"), but it's a respected social role, not subservient to a husband. Many other women train and fight as warriors, and it seems from the internal evidence that this has always been so. Urdo's first battle was won against a ferocious female outlaw, Goldpate, and her troop of marauders. Unlike Ash, Sulien is anything but unusual in her world.

This unusual social climate makes Walton's novel worth noting all by itself. *The King's Peace* gives us a world in which few roles are defined by gender, and the sexes co-exist without any history of oppression and resentment. The effect is almost as thrilling as a WNBA game. *The King's Peace* lets us glimpse what it might be like — or, more properly, might *have* been like — to live in a world untroubled by the problems that cloud gender relations in our own. I only hope that in the next volume (yes, there's certainly at least one more coming) Walton finds her narrative footing

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more solidly, so that the conceptual interest of her story can be matched by a suitably compelling drama.

Cecelia Holland's latest novel, *The Angel and the Sword*, is the story of another warrior woman, based on French medieval legends of "Roderick the Beardless" who helped save Paris from the Vikings. This Roderick is actually Ragny, a princess of Spain, disguised as a man, fleeing her father Markold and intent upon avenging her mother, whom Markold has almost certainly killed. On her deathbed, Ragny's mother Ingunn promises her daughter a guardian, and it comes in the form of an angel who protects Ragny in battle and strikes fear into her foes.

The angel, while rarely glimpsed and (wisely) left mostly undescribed — "only half-visible, like a crumpling of the air too fast and too dazzling bright for the eye" — nevertheless appears to be entirely real within the world of the book, adding a dollop of the fantastic to Holland's solidly realistic historical setting. *The Angel and the Sword* doesn't ring with quite the power of, say, *Jerusalem* (1996), Holland's novel of the 12th-century Latin Kingdoms of the East, wherein she conveyed both the deep alienness and common humanity of people in such a far past, but it does offer both a soberingly honest picture of life in 9th-century Europe and some wonderful glimpses of medieval ways of thought. The Paris of Charles the Bald (a much different sort from Burgundy's Charles the Bold) is little more than a shanty town set up amid the crumbling ruins of its past, and we feel acutely the weariness of the King and his people amidst the steady attacks of the Vikings. Ragny's piety outdoes even our current politicians, and yet seems heartfelt and true, a reflection of her time and place. And the battle scenes, while not nearly so harrowing or grisly as those Gentle describes, have a similar gritty believability.

Holland is at her best, though, with the character of John Scotus Eriugena, a real and fascinating historical figure (c. 810 - c. 875), one of the era's great scholars who helped gather, preserve, and transmit the learning of earlier centuries, and a notable free thinker. He's a rare and lonely man in his time, a devotee of learning and reason in a world dominated by dogma and superstition. The words Holland ascribes to him — perfectly in keeping with what we know of his character — show us what, to a modern mind, is the best side of the medieval character.

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"Not to think," he says at one point, "is a sin as much as not to love." And later: "God gave us words, and reason, too, that we could read the world, and find Him everywhere in it." John is the one person to see through Ragny's disguise, and he stands by her when her secret is revealed.

Though Holland works from legend, and veers not nearly so far from history as Gentle or Walton, her telling of Ragny's story betrays every bit as much its origins in a post-feminist world. Indeed, it may be the most "post" of them all. Here's a tale of a female warrior in a time of heavy oppression of women, saving one kingdom and winning back her own despite the irrational hatred and suspicion of others when they discover her true identity. But Holland doesn't play it as a lesson in women's equal or superior abilities. Rather, the central conflict for Ragny is her unhappiness with concealing her female self, her growing dislike for the character of Roderick she has invented and for all the social expectations it brings on her. Early on she enjoys it, and even finds in herself a thirst for battle—but that bloodlust reminds her too much of her father, and she begins to feel trapped: "Roderick was trying to stop thinking about the fighting, about that deep hot fury that had come over her, the delight in seeing other men down before her. That was not her, not really her." Later, tangled even deeper in her masquerade, Ragny prays, "Please, God, make me a woman again. Please." And when her secret finally comes out, and she's imprisoned awaiting judgment, she puts on a dress again and "shut her eyes, luxuriating in the freedom at last of being who she really was."

In the end, Ragny, like Ash, embodies the argument that true freedom for women does not lie in adopting the manners and roles of men — and that even men suffer from the traditional dictates of gender roles. "It isn't hard to be a man," Ragny tells Charles the Bald's daughter, Princess Alpiada. "You only have to give up everything sweet and good in life, and do murder, and trample other men under your feet.... They give men everything, as you say, to make up for that they really have nothing, no babies, no love, no sweetness in life, save what they can steal or beg from women." Perhaps the greatest triumph of feminism — or post-feminism — will be to free men as well from the sour burdens of the past.

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Andreas Eschbach was born in Ulm, Germany, in 1959. He is one of the most acclaimed sf writers to emerge in Germany in the past decade. His novels include Solarstation, Jesus Video, *and* Kelwitts Stern, *all three of which received the Kurd Lasswitz Award for Best Novel. This story, originally published in 1985, went on to form part of his first novel, Die* Haarteppichknüpfer *(*The Hair Carpet Makers*), which was published in 1995. As yet, there are no US editions of his books.*

The Carpetmaker's Son

By Andreas Eschbach
translated by Doryl Jensen

KNOT AFTER KNOT, DAY IN, day out, for an entire lifetime, always the same hand movements, always looping the same knots in the fine hair, so fine and so tiny that with time the fingers trembled and the eyes became weak from strain — and still the progress was hardly noticeable. When he made good headway in a day, there was a new piece of his carpet perhaps as big as his fingernail. So he squatted before the creaking carpet frame where his father and his father before him had sat, each with the same stooped posture and with the old, filmy magnifying lens before his eyes, his arms propped against the worn breastboard, moving the knotting needle with only the tips of his fingers. Thus he tied knot upon knot as it had been passed down to him for generations until he slipped into a trance in which he felt whole; his back ceased to hurt and he no longer felt the age in his bones. He listened to the many different sounds of the house which had

"Die Haarteppichknüpfer," copyright © 1985 by Andreas Eschbach, was first published in German in the December 1985 issue of *Flugasche*.

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been built by the grandfather of his great-grandfather — the wind which always slipped over the roof in the same way and was caught in the open windows, the rattling of dishes and the talking of his wives and daughters below in the kitchen. Every sound was familiar. He picked out the voice of the Wise Woman who had been staying in the house the past few days because the confinement of one of his wives, Garliad, was anticipated. He heard the muted doorbell clang, then the entry door opened and there was excitement in the murmuring of the voices. That was probably the peddler woman who was supposed to bring food supplies, textiles and other things today.

Then heavy footfalls creaked up the stairs to the carpet tying room. That must be one of the women bringing him his midday meal. Below they would be inviting the peddler woman to table to learn the latest gossip and to let themselves be talked into some bauble or other. He sighed, tightened the knot on which he was working, removed the magnifying lens and turned around.

Garliad stood there with her enormous belly and with a steaming plate in her hand, waiting to come in until he gave permission with an impatient gesture.

"What are the other women thinking, letting you work in your condition?" he growled. "Do you want to deliver my daughter on the stairs?"

"I feel very well today, Ostvan," Garliad responded.

"Where is my son?"

She hesitated. "I don't know."

"Then I can imagine where he is!" snorted Ostvan. "In the city! In that school! Reading books until his eyes ache and having his head filled with nonsense!"

"He tried to repair the heating and left to get some sort of part...that's what he said."

Ostvan hoisted himself up from his stool and took the plate from her hands. "I curse the day I allowed him to go to that school in the city. Was I not blessed by God until then? Didn't he first give me five daughters and then one son, so that I did not have to kill any of my children? And don't my daughters and wives have hair of all colors so that I do not have to dye the hair, and I can tie a carpet which one day will be worthy of the Emperor? Why can I not succeed in making a good carpetmaker of my son,

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so that someday I can take my place beside God to help him tie the great carpet of life?"

"You are quarreling with fate, Ostvan."

"Should I not quarrel —with such a son? I know why his mother did not bring me my food."

"I am supposed to ask you for money to pay the peddler," said Garliad.

"Money! Always money!" Ostvan put down the plate on the window sill and shuffled over to a chest with steel fittings, which was decorated with a photograph of the carpet his father had tied. It contained the money which was left from the sale of that carpet, packed in individual boxes, labeled with year numbers. He took out a coin. "Take it. But remember that this must last us for the rest of our lives."

"Yes, Ostvan."

"And when Abron returns, send him immediately to me."

"Yes, Ostvan." She left.

What kind of life was this, nothing but worry and aggravation! Ostvan pulled a chair up to the window and sat down to eat. His gaze became lost in the rocky, infertile desert. He used to go out occasionally, to look for certain minerals needed to make the secret compounds. He was even in the city several times to buy chemicals or tools. In the meantime he had accumulated everything he would ever need for his carpet. He probably would not go out again. He was no longer young; his carpet would soon be finished and then it would be time to think about dying.

Later, in the afternoon, quick steps on the stairs interrupted his work. It was Abron.

"You wanted to speak to me, Father?"

"Were you in the city?"

"I bought sootbrick for the heating."

"We still have sootbrick in the cellar, enough for generations."

"I didn't know."

"You could have asked me. But any excuse to go into the city is good enough for you."

Unbidden, Abron came closer. "I know it displeases you that I am in the city so often and read books. But I can't help it, Father. It is so interesting...these other worlds...there is so much to learn — so many different ways for people to live...."

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"I want to hear nothing of it. For you there is only one way to live. You have learned from me everything a hair carpetmaker must know; that is enough. You can tie all the knots, you have been instructed in impregnation and dying techniques, and you know the traditional patterns. When you have designed your carpet, you will take a wife and have many daughters with different colored hair. And for your wedding, I will cut my carpet from the frame, bind it and present it to you, and you will sell it in the city to the imperial merchant. That is what I did with the carpet of my father, and he did the same before me with the carpet of his father, and he with the carpet of his father, my great-grandfather; that is the way it has been from generation to generation for thousands of years. And just as I pay off my debt to you, you will pay off your debt to your son, and he to his son, and so on. It was always this way and it will always be so."

Abron gave a tortured sigh. "Yes, of course, Father, but I am not happy with this idea. I would rather not be a hair carpetmaker at all."

"I am a carpetmaker and therefore you will also be a carpetmaker!" With an agitated gesture, Ostvan pointed to the uncompleted carpet in the tying frame. "For my whole life, I have worked on tying this carpet...my whole life; and from the profit you will one day eat for your entire life. You have a debt to me, Abron, and I require that you pay off that debt to your own son. And God grant that he will not cause you as much sorrow as you have caused me!"

Abron did not dare look at his father as he replied, "There are rumors in the city about a rebellion, and rumors that the Emperor must abdicate.... Who will be able to pay for the hair carpets if the Emperor is gone?"

"The glory of the Emperor will outlast the light of the stars!" Ostvan said threateningly. "Didn't I teach you that phrase when you could barely sit up next to me at the carpet frame? Do you imagine that just anybody can come along and change the order of things which was set by God?"

"No, Father," mumbled Abron, "of course not."

Ostvan watched him. "Now go to work on your carpet design."

"Yes, Father."

Late in the evening Garliad's birthpangs began. The women accompanied her into the prepared birth room; Ostvan and Abron stayed in the kitchen.

Ostvan got two cups and a bottle of wine, and they drank silently.

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Sometimes they heard Garliad crying out or moaning in the birth room, then again there was nothing for a while. It was going to be a long night.

When his father fetched a second bottle of wine, Abron asked, "And if it is a boy?"

"You know as well as I do," Ostvan responded dully.

"Then what will you do?"

"The law has always said that a carpetmaker may only have one son, because a carpet can only support one family." Ostvan pointed to an old, stain-flecked sword hanging on the wall. "With that my grandfather killed my two brothers on the day of their birth."

Abron was silent. "You said that this is God's law," he finally erupted. "That must be a cruel God, don't you think?"

"Abron!" Ostvan thundered.

"I want to have nothing to do with your God!" screamed Abron and flung himself out of the kitchen.

"Abron! Stay here!"

But Abron tore up the stairs to the bedchambers and did not return.

So Ostvan waited alone, but he did not drink any more. The hours passed, and his thoughts became more gloomy. Finally the first cries of a child were mixed among the cries of the mother, and Ostvan heard the women lamenting and sobbing. He stood up heavily as though every movement were painful; he took the sword from the wall and laid it on the table. Then he stood there and waited with somber patience until the Wise Woman came from the birth room with the newborn in her arms.

"It is a boy," she said calmly. "Will you kill him, sir?"

Ostvan looked at the rosy, wrinkled face of the child. "No," he said. "He will live. I want him to be named Ostvan after me. I will teach him the craft of a hair carpetmaker, and should I not live long enough, someone else will complete his training. Take him back to his mother and tell her what I have said."

"Yes, sir," said the Wise Woman and bore the child out.

Ostvan, however, took the sword from the table, went with it up to the bedchambers and killed his son Abron.

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Robert Reed has almost certainly been our most prolific contributor of the past few years, and he has definitely been one of our most popular. Last year was a slow one for him, with a mere three stories in our pages; perhaps we can attribute this attrition to the fact that Mr. Reed was busy working on his mammoth novel Marrow, *which has recently been published. We expect he will do better this year. Here's his first tale for 2001, a story about sports and souls.*

Crooked Creek

By Robert Reed

DAD GIVES ME A CALL. HE says, "Listen, I'm going to be in town. Next week. On Tuesday." He says, "It's the same deal as last year. For that golf deal." There's an annual old farts tournament. He's come down for the last four or five years. "We're out at this new club," he tells me. "Crooked Creek. Know where that is?"

I say, "No."

Then I think again, and I tell him, "Wait. Out east of town, isn't it?"

"Is it? I've got the address written down. Somewhere." Slips of paper are being shuffled. "Yeah, well...somewhere," he promises me.

I'm hoping to hell he's not the one driving.

And as if he's reading my mind, he says, "I'm riding with Bill Wannamaker. You remember Bill."

Not particularly.

"Anyway," he says, "Things start at seven. We'll be done one, one-thirty. They're feeding us up at the clubhouse. I guess. If you want, come out for a minute or two. If you're not too busy."

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How do you explain busy to a retired man?
But I tell him, "Maybe."
Then I amend myself, adding, "Probably. Sure."
And that's where we leave things.

I've been seeing the same woman for five, six months. And we've reached that point where I'm having trouble seeing the point to things. Where I can pretty well imagine us parting ways.

Not that there's anything wrong with Colleen. It's just that we have next to nothing in common. Not age, since she's a good eleven years younger than me. Not hobbies, except that we both like watching old movies. But even then, someone usually has to compromise his or her good tastes. Then there's the fact that Colleen is vegetarian where I'm an omnivore. And worst of all, there's a question about beliefs. I'm a staunch Rationalist, and Darwin is my patron saint. Colleen is a born Catholic who long ago discovered a fascination for the occult. Which isn't that far from being Catholic, if you want the truth.

Anyway, that weekend, hunched over a plate of beans and rice, I mention my father and his consuming interest in golf. And the tournament. And my intention to drive out and say, "Hi," to the old bum.

"Can I tag along?" asks Colleen.

I don't say anything.

She reads my aura. My face. Or maybe the silence. Then she shrugs and says, "If you don't want me to go...."

"It's in the afternoon. Aren't you working?"

Colleen is a barber. Which is a story onto itself, honestly. She doesn't work Sundays and Mondays. I assumed that I'd be safe for Tuesday.

But she says, "I can take a long late lunch."

"Dad has this way," I begin. "Nothing ever happens on schedule."

She looks down at her plate, lips pursed.

I read the silence. Or her face. Or her aura, maybe. Then I tell her, "Just so you're warned. Sure, let's go watch some sweaty old men hitting tiny white balls."

And that's where we leave things.

I don't know why golf has to make this sudden comeback. It embodies

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everything that I truly hate in a quasi-sport. Golf, at its heart, is elitist and proud of it. The courses themselves are monocultures of hybrid grasses maintained with industrial doses of fertilizer and herbicides, the grass groomed until it resembles nothing else found in Nature. And worst of all, I hate the game because I don't play it anymore and because I despised playing it when I was a boy. Dad used to haul me over to a little nine hole course near our house. He gave me next to no instructions, and precious little encouragement. My old man belongs to that generation that learned by doing, whether it was playing golf or fighting fascism to the death. And what made my golfing career even more excruciating: One day, walking into the clubhouse, we happened to bump into one of Dad's buddies, and his buddy's son. As it happened, I halfway knew the kid. He went to my school. He was a year behind me, and tubby, and silly looking with that little sack of clubs hanging on his fat little shoulder.

The men decided that we'd make a foursome, and I thought: Good.

As usual, my opening shot carved up a piece of the green turf, flinging my ball all of fifty feet. But my fat friend would make me look good, I kept thinking. Right up until his swing, which was as smooth and strong as mine felt cranky and sloppy. And with a determined *whoosh*, the driver cut through the air, and the ball was launched — a study in efficient ballistics that ended on the green, maybe twenty feet from the mocking flag.

I tell Colleen that story while I'm driving. And she laughs at my misery. She always seems to appreciate my humor. Which is a huge point in her favor, I can tell you.

"I never played golf again," I boast.

She laughs and looks ahead. Colleen has a pretty profile, her face fine and young and her curly red hair always needing a brush, and I'm wondering for the umpteenth time if there's something seriously wrong with me. One bad marriage and a string of broken relationships. Is it me? Am I just asking too much from the institution of love?

"Is that the place?" she asks.

Corn fields — another ecological abomination — give way to a rolling carpet of unbroken green lawn. Trees are small and scarce. What must be the clubhouse is perched on the crest of the hill. A bright warm day in May, and the parking lot is only half-filled. Things aren't as busy as I'd guessed.

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But then again, the old farts have probably car-pooled from both ends of the state.

The cars are just what I'd expect. Lincolns and Cadillacs and such.

I park between Cadillacs.

There isn't a breath of wind, which is remarkable. I mention it as we're walking toward the clubhouse. "Springtime on the plains, and not even a breeze," I mutter, glancing at my watch.

One-thirty-one. I'm nothing if not punctual.

There's always something intimidating about clubhouses, and particularly this one. It's a massive long building made from dark wood and imported stone. Entering through the front door would feel wrong. So I steer us around the side, climbing onto a raised porch that hugs the building's upper story. And what worries me right off is that the place feels deserted. Is this the right course? The right clubhouse? The right day?

Through tinted windows, I make out an almost empty bar.

Somewhere ahead of us, balls are getting whacked. I walk to the end of the porch, looking across the driving range. Young men stand in a line, swinging for the next county. And it occurs to me suddenly that the sound of golf has changed in thirty years. That hard sharp *whap* sound is new. Today's drivers are made from titanium alloys, and the balls have nickel cores. "If we put as much energy and invention into the space program," I tell Colleen, "then we'd have cities on the moon by now. If not Mars."

"And golf courses, too," she says.

Which makes me laugh.

A team roster has been posted on one of the tinted windows. I pause, looking for my father's name. And he appears at the end, on the last team. Which is bad news, if I was hoping to get out of here soon.

"Which one is he?" Colleen asks.

But she's not looking at the names. She's staring out at the course itself. Between our hilltop and the wooded stream bed, I can make out maybe a hundred old guys in hats and colorful clothes. Half of them, easily, could be my father.

"I'm going to ask someone," I tell her.

"I'm going to stand right here," she replies.

The bar isn't quite empty. A pair of golfers are enjoying tall beers, and

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there's a bright new television turned to the golfing channel, and there's a youngish man talking on a cell phone, looking like the prototypical golf pro. I'm thinking about asking him about the tournament. Then I spot a girl standing behind a tall counter. A college coed already out for the summer, is my guess. Blonde and pretty, and I'm wondering when did twenty-year-old girls become so impossibly pretty. So delicious. I give her a smile, saying, "I'm looking for my father." I tell her, "He's playing in the old-fart tournament."

She laughs, sort of.

"They're running late," she admits. "They probably won't be coming in...I don't know...for another fifty minutes or so..."

Why am I not surprised?

I thank her, and I start to turn away.

"Old farts," says one of the golfers. "What's that mean?"

He and his buddy are sitting at a little round table. They're captains of industry, probably. But to me they look like puffy-faced men with a history of heart disease.

I say, "Pardon?"

"Careful what you call people," is the golfer's advice. There's a beery offense being taken. "Didn't your folks ever teach you that?"

What can I do? I just shrug and march outside again. Distracted, and a little pissed. I'm thinking about having to wait for another hour. I'm hoping that Colleen has to get back to work, giving me the perfect excuse to leave. Then I'm considering the girl at the counter, remembering her face...and Colleen waits at the porch rail, leaning into it a little bit...and without looking at me, says, "Kiss?"

She might be talking to the golf course, saying "Now?"

I come up behind her and put a hand against the small of her narrow back, and she tips her head toward me with her blue eyes closed. Then as soon as I'm done kissing her, she volunteers, "I don't have an appointment until four-fifteen."

She says, "As long as you want, I can wait."

She's a funny, funny girl.

According to the way I tell it, I just happened to be shopping for a new barber and Colleen happens to work in a little shop that's walking distance

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from my house. Coincidence is responsible; no cosmic alignments or any other flavor of bull.

She started me off with a shampoo. Which was fine. But as she worked with my hair, something about her hands changed. The rhythm of them. Their purpose. We had slipped into a slow massage, and eventually, with a quiet, serious voice, she said, "You feel like a vegetarian."

"Why?" I muttered.

"It's your scalp," she said. "It's very healthy, very relaxed."

A compliment is a compliment. I gave a shrug, saying, "Thanks." Then because I couldn't let her think that I was, I showed her a tooth-rich smile, confessing, "But I do like my meat. Quite a bit, frankly."

"Then I was wrong," she allowed.

She said it instantly. Not the least bit bothered by her mistake, I noticed. Which surprised me, considering how some of these people can be.

Like with any new hairdresser or dentist, our conversation resembled every first date of my life. Where I grew up. Where I went to school. What I do for a living. And when I mentioned my college, Colleen piped up at once, saying, "Then you must know the ghost of White Hall."

"Old Miss Markel," I said knowingly.

"You've seen her?" she asked. Sounding, if anything, hopeful.

I laughed politely, and I said, "Never had the pleasure."

Colleen took a long pause. Except to tell me to dip my head forward, please, so that she could rinse out my hair. Which left me in the perfect pose to consider that tall music teacher who died in her office some seventy years ago, and according to legend, still walks the old hallways, pausing from time to time to stroke a few keys on her favorite Aerosonic.

Finally, as a joke, I asked, "Have you met Miss Markel?"

That's when Colleen said my name for the first time.

"Johnny?" she said. And I lifted my head, seeing her reflection in the mirror in front of me. Seeing what I can only describe as a strong and even and wise smile. Colleen has a pretty face and fit young body and bright red hair that on almost any other woman comes from a bottle. And with a little wink and a self-deprecating laugh, she asked, "If I told you yes, that I'd seen a ghost...would you think I was crazy...?"

With her, it's easy to tell the truth.

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I said, "Oh, probably. Yeah."

"And if you thought I was crazy," she continued, "then I suppose you wouldn't say, 'Yes.'"

"To what?" I asked.

"Would you like to go out with me some evening?" she asked. And when I didn't respond in a timely fashion, she added, "You do believe in dates, don't you?"

I forgot all about ghosts.

"Sure, I do," I said.

For no reason that I can point to, I told her, "Sure. Let's go out."

I DON'T SEE MY FATHER much. My parents split when I was a teenager, and ever since, our relationship has been spotty — one of the back-burner issues in my life. Something to be lived with, like my stiff elbow. I can't say that we have disagreements when we're together, much less genuine fights. Dad's always been an agreeable if somewhat odd soul. But between me and my father lies a distance. With me, it's the emotional garbage of him leaving us. With him, I don't know what it is. He's always been an aloof creature. With me, and with everyone. And over the years, it's grown worse. That or maybe I've gotten better about being offended by his faraway stares and his lingering silences.

Waiting on the clubhouse porch, I feel a nagging embarrassment. Every time a golf cart drives up, one or two of the riders looks like my father. The same pale, sun-drowned flesh. The same ugly-ass hats and the bright shirts and the bulky shorts. But these are just the first waves of tournament players, I keep telling myself. Dad's somewhere in the last wave. Coming closer a stroke at a time.

I buy us two iced teas — black tea, not the green that Colleen hopes for — and we claim an outside table.

Still, there isn't a breath of wind. Flags hang limp on every pole, and the young trees are as still as photographs. Yet the air is dry and pleasantly cool, and lovely, and I'm not too awfully bored, even after the first twenty minutes. Even when we've started our second glasses of tea.

Colleen asks about my father.

And my mother.

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And in sneaky ways, she asks about me.

Dad is deep into his seventies. And I warn her the same way that I've warned my other women: He might seem awfully distracted, but she shouldn't take it personally. That's just the way he is. Not the way he started out in life. But it's the way he became.

"Why's that?" she asks. Naturally.

"It was the war," I reply. "Mom knew him before. When they were kids. Dad was this smiling, happy boy when World War II started, and he came back changed. Like a lot of them did, of course."

"Where did he fight?"

"The Pacific."

"What did he do?" she inquires.

"Rode in an airplane," I tell her.

"Oh, yeah?"

"B-29s," I add. "Which were big bombers."

She stares at me. Then with her eyes narrowing, she smirks, reminding me, "I'm not totally ignorant here. Thank you."

"Sorry."

She sips her cold tea, saying nothing else.

I look at the deck beneath our feet. This is a brand new facility, yet the cedar planks are riddled with holes. Little holes. It takes me a few moments to realize why. Beefy golfers walking here with their goofy spiked shoes. Glancing down at my watch, I decide that we've been waiting for more than forty minutes. Then with a quiet and serious voice, I tell her, "My father's bomber went down, by the way. It crashed into the ocean."

Colleen looks at me.

"I don't know much more about it," I admit. "It was the biggest rule when I was growing up. I could never ask Dad about the war. Ever."

I'm telling her this, and I'm serving up a warning, too.

"What I know," I continue, "is that everyone else on that bomber died. And he survived after floating in the ocean, alone, for something like two days, and nights...."

She swirls her ice, asking, "Was it shot down?"

"I think so."

"You're not sure?"

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I have to shrug my shoulders, saying, "I haven't heard the whole story. Except for some old military files, maybe...only my father knows...."

A golfer strolls past. A big man smelling of cigarettes. Pausing, he asks me, "Is that where we tee off?"

I look up at him.

With my eyes, I tell him to leave us alone. With my voice, I say, "I really don't have the tiniest clue."

Disgruntled, he continues along the porch, his fancy, silly, and overpriced shoes punching fresh holes into the cedar. I watch him for a moment, then I watch the latest crop of young men smashing balls out across the driving range. The world is at peace today, and they have time as well as money to waste. Then I happen to glance straight down, looking at a patch of raked gravel where golf carts are being parked in a neat row. A lone man has left his cart, climbing toward the clubhouse with his head down. I can't see anything about him but the top of his floppy lime-green hat and the weak old shoulders and the way that his legs, despite riding around in a motorized cart, are weary, barely able to lift the feet that are wearing beat-up old golf shoes that I don't recognize. I don't know the man or his clothes. He's too small to be my father. Christmas was the last time I saw him face to face. But that can't be Dad, I'm thinking. Old is one thing, but this poor fellow, whoever he is, looks pretty much washed up.

I happen to glance at Colleen.

She gives me a peculiar look. And by lifting her pale blue eyes and one corner of her mouth, she asks, "Is that him?"

How could she know my father? Before me?

But I look again, and that's when the fossil lifts his head, showing me his face. I'm looking straight at him, knowing him. And I lean out over the railing now, showing him my own face.

But Dad doesn't seem to notice me.

Looking straight at me, he stops to breathe a few good breaths. Then down goes his head, and he continues to plug his way toward the clubhouse, and us.

"It's him," I grumble.

Then I look at Colleen.

She gives her ice and her tea a little swirl, then sets down her glass again. But she nearly misses our table, leaving the glass teetering over the

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edge far enough that gravity and the slick condensation let it tip and fall with a sloppy crash.

And still, she watches my father.

Blue eyes like saucers.

Watching.

ON OUR SECOND or third date, we went to a coffee house in one of the old warehouses next to downtown, and Colleen motioned and asked if I could see him. "Who?" I asked, following her gaze. Then I told her, "I don't see anyone," because there was nothing to see except an empty table tucked in the back of the room. Obviously.

Then came an afternoon when we went walking in a wooded park. It was late winter, but not too cold. And I caught her staring at a big hackberry tree. Watching something. So I had to ask, "What are you watching?"

I asked, "Is there a coyote? A deer? What?"

But she just shook her head and made a point of smiling at me, saying with a careful little voice, "It's nothing. Never mind."

Sometime later, I remembered the story. How several years back, a young man dumped by his girlfriend had gone to that park and thrown an electrical cord over a branch and hanged himself to death. And Colleen probably knew the story, and the power of suggestion did the rest. I told myself. Explaining it to my own self.

Then there was an evening, not long ago, when I finally asked her, "Why did you leave the Catholic faith?

"Not that you shouldn't have," I added.

She sat up in bed, showing me her pale and narrow back. And throwing a good stare over her shoulder, she said, "When I was a girl, twelve or so, I realized that the church didn't really know very much about souls, and death...and just like that, I realized that I wasn't a believer, and I'd never been one, either. You know?"

Spike-pocked cedar stairs lead up to the porch.

I'm waiting at the top of the stairs, watching him climb. His head is down. His head lifts up, gauging distances. Then the old man starts to drop

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his eyes again — watery and distracted brown eyes — before he blinks and looks up at me, and the puffy face goes into a smile. And he says, "There you are!" and laughs in a big way.

I tell him, "Hi, Dad."

Then Colleen is next to me, grabbing hold of my hand with both of hers. Which is different. And she sounds remarkably nervous, her voice breaking when she introduces herself, concluding by saying, "It's really a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Harris."

"On, no! The pleasure's all mine," my father counters. And he gives a wink, conquering the last of the stairs with a little burst of speed.

I'm nervous too, I realize.

But not my father. He says, "Yeah, the boys got a late start this morning." Meaning the old men, of course. He says, "Sorry for the wait," with the same easy, well-practiced manner that he's used to gloss over everything for the last forty years. Then he asks, "How's the food in this place? I haven't eaten a bite since four this morning."

"You must be famished," says Colleen.

I can't decide if Dad heard her. One of his long stares comes over him, and he takes a big breath. Then his expression changes. "We're supposed to get a lunch eventually," he says. "But I'll tell you, I'd rather eat something right now. In the bar, maybe. What do you think? My treat?"

I start to say, "Okay."

But Colleen interrupts, telling him, "No, it's my treat, Mr. Harris — "

"Harvey," he corrects her.

"Harvey," she repeats.

Dad winks again. Nice and easy. He's always been nothing but pleasant with my new women. Goodness knows, he's had enough practice.

With Colleen holding the door, we slip inside.

It's the blonde coed who takes our orders. The old farts that I offended have disappeared. Thankfully. Golf is still playing on the big television. And I'm trying hard not to stare at the coed, which is why I find myself watching highlights from last weekend's professional tournament.

In a casual way, I ask, "How did it go today? Your game, I mean."

A pause.

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Then Dad blinks and looks in my general direction, and he says, "Good. Real good! Until we got to the back nine."

"How's this new course?" I ask.

"Fine," he tells me. "Until that back nine."

We all have a little laugh about that.

Then Dad gestures at the television, saying, "Let me tell you about that kid. See him there? Missing that putt?" He shakes his head, saying, "Past the hype, he's nothing special. Not yet, and probably won't ever be." Dad pulls his hand across his mouth like he has a million times in my life. Then he says, "What the best ones do, day in and day out...it takes something more important than talent, I can tell you."

"Like what?" Colleen prompts.

"Arrogance," he says. "That's what you need. All those people watching you, and all that money riding on your next long putt, and if you pay attention to anything that isn't your ball and the green, and the way the green lays, and your putter, and your hands, and shoulders, and how your legs are positioned...well, if there's any world outside your game, then you're not arrogant enough. There's no damn way that you can sink that putt. Not with talent, you can't. Luck, maybe. But luck gives you two strokes, or three. At the most."

I've been here before. I know this speech halfway by heart.

But the words seem to mean everything to Colleen. She leans over the little table, egging Dad on with her questions. Who are the best players now? And before? When did he start to play? What's his handicap? Is that the right word? Handicap? Then she looks around the room, asking what, if he doesn't mind telling, was his best game ever?

I'm listening to the two of them, and I'm not.

If there's anything more boring than golf, it's talking about golf.

That's what I'm thinking when our lunches come, and that's what I'm still thinking when we're finished eating. I had a so-so burger. Colleen had a grilled cheese sandwich. And my starving father ate most of a little salad and drank maybe half of his iced tea.

I'm worried about the old man.

That's what I'm thinking about, halfway listening while he tells us how most of the professionals are big smokers. Not on camera, but everywhere else. They use the nicotine to keep their nerves steady. Which

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is something that I'd never heard. And frankly, it's knowledge that leaves me feeling even more superior than before.

On that note, I stand and announce, "I'll be right back."

Three iced teas is my limit.

The big dining room at the far end of the clubhouse is filled with old men. A raspy voice is reading off names. The morning's winners, apparently. I listen for my father's name, but it isn't mentioned. Too bad. Then I find my way back to the bar and with a glance, I know that something here has changed.

Colleen is speaking to my father now.

And from his expression, I can tell that Dad's actually listening to her. With huge eyes, he stares at the area under the television, nodding in a careful way. A funny half-smile tries to emerge on his face. Then, he glances at my girlfriend. Then he straightens his back, something about his posture and his attitude implying some great embarrassment. Or is it relief? Maybe it's both things, I'm thinking. As I'm walking up on them. Feeling like the intruder here.

"The tall, handsome one," I hear her saying. "Which one is he?"

Dad answers in a mutter, then looks at my direction and shuts his mouth instantly. Nothing showing now but embarrassment.

"He was our pilot," I heard him say. Confess. Whatever.

"That's what I imagined," Colleen remarks, patting Dad fondly on the knee as she turns to look at the same empty space. "That's what makes perfect sense."

My father shuts his eyes and tilts his head — an ignore-the-world gesture older than me — and after a few moments, when his eyes open again, he discovers to his complete and utter horror that his son now stands in front of him.

For a slippery instant, it looks as if fifty years of determined self-control might evaporate.

Dad takes a deep wet breath. Then, a second breath. I watch the eyes brighten as the face tries to smile, and fails. Then his expression tumbles into a look of profound embarrassment and disgust and worry. I can see my father asking himself what I heard, if anything. And what I think about it. And he has to wonder what I'll say next, which makes two of us. I don't know what I'm thinking, much less how to respond. I'm feeling puzzled.

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Lost, even. Baffled, and in strange ways, sad. Then because I can't think of anything better, I look at Colleen, hoping for a few salient words of advice.

Our silence is shattered by a new voice.

"Harvey! Is this where you're hiding out?"

Dad blinks. Smiles again. And says, "Bill," with the grateful tone of a man who was praying for any interruption. "You remember my son, Johnny...?"

Bill Wannamaker is a big ruddy-faced man. I don't remember him. Not even a little bit. But he says, "Ah, sure," as if we're old buddies, and he gives me a bone-crushing handshake. Then he turns back to Dad, saying, "Look, Harv! Look what you won in the drawing!" From one of the pockets of his ugly-ass golfing trousers, Bill pulls out a long box of new white golf balls. "Almost makes up for those you lost in that damned creek. Doesn't it?"

Dad's embarrassment is small and pleasant. Everyone enjoys a good friendly laugh at his expense.

Then Bill announces, "Our guys are starting to pull out. How about you, Harv? You about ready here?"

There's a brief pause.

"We could drive you home, Harvey," says Colleen, patting my father on the knee again. "I'll make a quick call and cancel my afternoon appointments. That'll be okay with them. Is it okay with you, Johnny?"

I hear myself saying, "Sure. Why not?"

Bill is staring hard at Colleen's hand and Dad's lucky knee. Envy makes the ruddy face grow even redder now.

"My clubs," Dad chirps. "They're out in Bill's trunk."

Colleen gives me a little look.

"I'll get them for you," I promise.

Bill leads me to the parking lot, saying nothing for most of the trip. Then as he opens the cavernous trunk of his big Lincoln, he has to ask, "Is that redheaded girl...is she here with you?"

"Nope," I tell him.

"I never saw her before in my life," I tell him.

That stops our conversation dead.

I wrestle with Dad's old bag and clubs, fitting the worn leather strap

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over my shoulder. Then I head for my car, thinking about everything. Feeling certain about nothing. Pulling up short, I take a deep breath, and I turn and walk back up to the clubhouse with the bag and clubs growing heavier by the minute. I find my girl and my father out on the porch. They're talking to each other. Dad asks something, and Colleen answers him. Then Colleen tells him something else. Something that needs a quiet voice and a hand touching him on the shoulder. And the old man nods and wipes at his mouth and looks down the long green hillside, neither of them saying anything now.

I set the bag down with a rattling *pop*, and to my father, I say, "We've got time. What if we buy ourselves a bucket of balls?"

I DON'T MENTION GHOSTS.

Standing beside Colleen, I watch my father as he concentrates on the ball and himself. Years of determined practice are visible in the twist of his hips and the grip of his two hands and the changing angle of the driver. The sharp solid *whap* of the ball is impressive in its own right. For a moment, I lose the ball in the fierce glare of the sun. Then it drops to the driving range, and bounces, and rolls, and vanishes again.

"Very good!" Colleen declares, giving a little applause.

The ball does seem as if it went a long, long way. And maybe that's why Dad decides to stop here. He turns and hands me his driver, saying, "You give it a whack."

"I'm not very good," I warn.

"Oh, I remember," he responds.

And I prove my incompetence with half a dozen graceless hacks. If I picked up the balls and threw them overhand, I'd do better. My last shot never gets more than a quarter inch off the ground, and all I can do after that abomination is hand back the driver, laughing along with the rest of our little threesome.

"Now you," says Dad. Handing it over to Colleen.

Her whacks are crisp but determined, all of her balls traveling farther than mine.

Which is fine, I discover.

Is perfect, even.

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Dad finishes the bucket for us. And when Colleen and I are standing behind him, at a respectful distance, I finally ask, "What do you see right now?"

She turns her head and says, "You."

"You know what I mean."

She looks back at him and says, "Nothing. When he concentrates, like he's doing right now, the ghosts fade away."

"How many are there?" I ask.

"Four. Five. Maybe six." She squints, telling me, "But only three of them are clear, consistent presences."

"I don't believe in ghosts," I remind her.

"Fine."

"But assuming there's something there, I mean. Why pick on him?"

"Your father has a rare gift, or a curse. Either way, it lets him see the dead." She shrugs and gives me a patient look. "It started when he was a boy, I guess. But it was just an occasional talent. Then there was a fuel leak and his plane caught fire, and he managed to parachute free. Only him. The rest of his crew died. His best friends in the world, and they died together, and after all these years, they're still pissed that their lives are finished, and your father still feels guilty that he's still among the living."

I don't know what to say.

What to think.

"The pilot?" I mutter.

"Is their ringleader." She points. "A self-possessed little spirit, frankly."

I stare at the empty air. At nothing. And for lack of better, I ask, "How can anyone live that way? Followed everywhere by angry ghosts?"

"I don't know how," she admits.

Dad sets down the last ball and swings, and the *whap* is different. Is loud and crisp, and perfect. The ball flies across the blue May sky, instantly tiny, and it ends up in the trees all the way down by Crooked Creek.

Colleen and I clap our hands.

Then she turns to me, and with a voice quiet and firm says, "The thing about ghosts, Johnny. They're extremely simple. Whatever they are. They come out of something angry or lost inside a person, and I've always felt sorry for the poor things."

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She says, "I'm just warning you, Johnny."

"Why warn me?" I have to ask.

"Because, darling, if you're not careful," she tells me, "you're going to end up trapped like *them*."

She points at the bright empty air.

And my father picks up the empty bucket and his driver, then starts to walk with a tired steady gait, shoving his way through all those angry ghosts, doing a hero's walk in order to get to us.

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It's funny how unpredictable trends arise sometimes. Last year we published two stories about stealing art from the Louvre, the first of which was Mr. Slesar's tale "The Museum." Now he brings us a brief and pointed look at genetic engineering and high society. Will this spark another trend?

The Dinner Party

By Henry Slesar

MRS. MAUREEN HALEY-Fitzmorris, struggling into the Dior gown she had bought ten years ago, looked at her matronly reflection and realized, not without amusement, that she had finally grown into her name.

When she married Herbert Haley-Fitzmorris, CEO of the Tektor Corporation, she had been simply Maureen Brown, and wore Dior only on runways at fashion shows. Herbert was a dull husband, but the marriage had been a revelation just the same. She would listen to his dinnertime stories of corporate skullduggery, his defense of ground well poisoning, the illicit dumping of toxic waste, cruel animal experiments, a dozen other offenses against man and beast, and an activist was born.

When Herbert's Type A personality left her a rich widow with a large bundle of corporate shares, Maureen dedicated her life to Causes, and none more compelling than the one which was now forcing her into a dress two sizes too small. She was going to a dinner party, given by Franklin Whitlow of the Whitlow Corporation, a company which considered itself

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the cutting edge of the genetic engineering revolution. There would be revelations at this dinner table, too. Just like old times.

Maureen wasn't going alone. The activist group known as STF (Save The Future) had suggested an escort. He was a large, amiable man who looked superb in evening dress, and whose IQ was well below a hundred. His name was Roy Lummer, and Roy was as friendly and loyal as an Alsatian puppy. STF chairman Vincent Roker, aware of Maureen's sometimes radical behavior, had decided that Roy's protection might be prudent.

She was dressed and ready, except for one accessory. She chose the largest evening bag in her closet and placed the dainty but deadly Derringer into its silken folds.

Roy Lummer was downstairs, wearing evening dress identical to what the waiters would be wearing. He grinned toothily when he saw her. "You know something, Mrs. H? You're a good-looking babe."

"Just remember what you were told, Roy. Before Mr. Whitlow begins his presentation after dinner, you go to the men's room. Don't come back to the table until you've made a thorough canvass of the house."

"What's 'canvas,' Mrs. H?"

"Just check out the place, Roy. There's a rumor that Whitlow maintains a private laboratory in the house, perhaps even a clinic. See what you can find. If anyone questions you, just pretend you're a waiter who lost his way. Got that?"

"You betcha," Roy said.

The Whitlow mansion was as grand as the aspirations of its owner. Every automobile that wheeled about the circular driveway was large, black, and shiny. Most of the men who emerged from the back seats were large (if only in circumference), white, and silver-haired. Some of their wives were afterthoughts; some were showpieces.

There were a dozen round tables in the dining room, facing the oblong one on a platform. It looked like the setting for the Last Supper before the Guests arrived, but Maureen dropped the analogy when she counted only seven chairs. Whitlow and his six Vice-Presidents.

They didn't make their appearance until after the main course was served, and by then Whitlow's guests were so seduced by the remarkable food that no one paid them any attention. Even Maureen, whose own cook

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had once been cited by Michelin, found herself mellowing toward the man she had once cheerfully called "a monster."

Maybe, she thought, she might not use the gun after all.

The dessert, a spectacular tower of chocolate, fruits, creams, and spirits, brought on audible groans of ecstasy among the diners. When coffee was served, and Franklin Whitlow rose to speak, there was loud applause. He might have been well-advised to skip his speech and ask for his funding right then and there.

Instead, Whitlow said: "Ladies and gentlemen, I'd like you to know one fact about tonight's dinner. Everything you have just eaten was genetically modified."

There was a stir, of course. With few exceptions among the corporate executives present there was doubt, apprehension, and even fear of the subject of genetic engineering. They were no different from the rest of the public, who chewed and digested their food in exactly the same way.

"Now we're not going to have a debate here this evening about the rights and wrongs, the benefits and dangers of genetic modification, or GM as we call it. But in this room are many of the men and women who will sooner or later decide the fate of not only this infant science, but perhaps of the Planet Earth."

Whitlow picked up a white placard, and turned it around to face them. It read:

6,000,000,000.

"I trust you all recognize this number. Only a short time ago, statisticians concluded that the world population had finally reached it. Six billion of us on this small planet. Six billion mouths to feed on a world with shrinking arable land and resources. Six billion potential sufferers from diseases as old as cholera and as new as AIDS.

"Ladies and gentlemen, if you think our little world has faced crises before, if you think the Apocalypse horses we should fear most are War and Pestilence, think again. It is Famine which should scare the Hell out of us. Famine that will cause suffering on a scale beyond anything we've known. Famine that will start wars and bring pestilence down upon us. Mr. Malthus will be chuckling in his grave in this wonderful twenty-first century, because, ladies and gentlemen, he will be proven right.

"Unless, of course, we find the answer. And I'm here to tell you that

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we have found it, not by discovering more arable land — there isn't any — but by making the foods we produce bigger, better, healthier, and cheaper. Some of you may think I have left out a word. *Safer.* That's the key word of the argument from those who call genetic modification Frankenfood. With a dread based more upon superstition than scientific fact, they are convinced that GM foods are simply not safe for human consumption.

"Ladies and gentlemen, you've all made pigs of yourselves tonight — guinea pigs."

He grinned, expecting a laugh that never came.

"But have no fear. There has yet to be a shred of evidence that genetic manipulation produces anything but beneficial results. And this is only the beginning — "

"Mr. Whitlow!"

He looked genuinely surprised. Even more so when he realized the interruption came from a handsome, matronly woman who was dining alone, and was now standing beside her chair.

"Wasn't there a 'shred' just a few weeks ago? When *The Lancet* in England published a study about how rats fed with modified potatoes developed thickening of the stomach walls and other — "

"Madame, excuse me! I did say at the outset that we weren't here for a debate — "

"I'm not debating, Mr. Whitlow, I'm asking a question! And while I'm about it, could we please have your views on GM's effect on the ecosystem? Did you know that the Monarch butterflies are dying when exposed to pollen from genetically modified maize?"

The man at the end of the table rose, and asked sternly: "Madame, would you kindly identify yourself?"

"I am Mrs. Haley-Fitzmorris, and I am chairwoman of the EDI-Zeta Corporation, formerly known as Tektor. And as a corporate officer, I'm also concerned about the profit motive in GM seeds which can only be used with the products of certain companies, and in Terminator seeds that can't be planted again — "

"Mrs. Fitzmorris," Whitlow said, licking his lips. "we're prepared to answer all of your concerns, but this isn't the proper time or place — "

"But what I need to know most of all," Maureen said, in a rising voice, "is about the rumor that your company is now experimenting with

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transgenics — growing human parts on the backs of mice, for instance — "

"That experiment was not done at our company, Mrs. Fitzmorris — "

"It's Haley-Fitzmorris, Mr. Whitlow. And there are rumors that some of your experiments are even more outrageous! We've heard that you've been inserting human genes — people genes! — into animals and plants of every variety! You're creating monsters and releasing them into the environment, threatening a transfer of dangerous viruses across species! Sometimes these transfers happen by accident, like AIDS — assuming it *was* an accident — but your company is conducting experiments that may make the AIDs epidemic seem like nothing more than a bad cold! You're not just dealing in genes, Mr. Whitlow, you're dealing in genies! Genies we can never get back into the bottle!"

She felt a touch on her left elbow. Two waiters were there, and judging from their size and build, they hadn't been hired for their plate-juggling skills.

"All right!" she said. "I'm willing to leave now, if I may ask just one more question."

Whitlow seemed so relieved by the offer that he merely nodded his head.

"The most frightening rumor we have heard," she said, "is that you are conducting experiments on human beings. I don't mean cloning. I mean that you are inserting plant and animal genes into human bodies to determine their effect — "

Whitlow's hand was raised and so was his voice.

"That's enough, Mrs. Fitzmorris! The question is preposterous. I am neither Dr. Frankenstein nor Dr. Moreau. The Whitlow Corporation is in the business of nourishing the human race — not mutilating it!"

There was a smattering of applause, all of it from the long table on the raised platform.

"Throughout history," he said, "ignorant people, small-minded people, have objected to scientific investigation, calling every experiment 'tampering with nature.' But Mother Nature, Madam, has been tampering with the human race since Man appeared on this planet. Science is our first line of defense against her continuing hostility."

Maureen looked at the two young waiters, a look that made them release her elbows. Then, with a dignified toss of her head, she started for

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the exit and they followed. She was clutching her purse fiercely, but she knew she would never employ its contents.

WHEN THE VALET parker delivered her Lexus, Roy Lummer appeared as well. He moved behind the wheel and they drove away.

"I hope you had better luck than I did, Roy."

"I almost got caught twice," he smiled, "but I told them I was a waiter, like you said, and they told me to go back downstairs."

"And did you?"

"Yeah, sure, but I went right back up again. I didn't find no laboratory though. I mean, laboratories, that's where they have bottles and machines and operating tables and like that, right?"

"Yes," Maureen said wearily.

"Once I opened this door, and there was this woman in bed. That kind of scared me so I closed the door pretty quick."

"I understand, Roy."

He related more of his adventure, but Maureen was no longer listening. She realized that all her plans had been badly laid; that the triumphant scenes she had anticipated had all been foolish fantasies. The Derringer in her silken purse now seemed like a ludicrous affectation. She would never have been able to commit an assassination, even if she was convinced of Whitlow's infamy.... Now she was having doubts that the STF had received the correct intelligence about the Whitlow agenda....

That morning, at three A.M., Maureen sat up in bed as if wakened by a cannon shot.

Her heart pounding, she picked up the phone and dialed Vincent Roker's home number. His voice was thick with sleep, but he was still relieved to hear hers.

"We've got to take action!" Maureen says. "We've got to move right now, before Whitlow realizes that we know the truth! Roy did say that he was seen on that second floor — "

"All right," the chairman said, "We'll make our move first thing in the morning. I can even get a warrant — the police commissioner is my father-in-law."

"What can we call it?"

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"How about suspicion of abduction? Kidnapping? All that matters is that we produce that poor woman!"

It was six-thirty when the police car and ambulance arrived at the Whitlow mansion, and after ten minutes of loud and angry protest they made their way to the second floor and to the bedroom where Roy had committed his blunder of the night before. Only Vincent Roker was permitted to enter. The woman covered her bright red face with the bed sheet and burst into tears. When the STF chairman solemnly guaranteed her privacy, she agreed to accompany him.

When Maureen emerged from the secured hospital room her pallor was as white as the hospital walls. Vincent Roker took her hands and led her to a seat in the solarium.

"Now tell me about it," he said. "How did you know? What made you realize the truth — at three o'clock in the morning?"

"I would have known earlier," Maureen said, "if I had listened more carefully to what Roy Lummer was saying, if I had understood that he wasn't simply using slang."

"And what was it Roy said?"

"He was telling me about the woman he saw in the bedroom. He said she was some tomato." ☙

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FILMS

KATHI MAIO

A TRANSPARENT CASE OF LARCENY

I WONDER what James Whale and H. G. Wells would have had to say about this month's little travesty.

Whale (horror filmmaker extraordinaire, and subject of the very fine screen biography, *Gods and Monsters*, a couple of years ago) made a movie back in 1933 called *The Invisible Man*. The film was written by R. C. Sherriff and Philip Wylie, and based, of course, on the 1897 classic novel by the grand-père of modern science fiction, H. G. Wells.

The film's special effects, although extremely modest by today's standards, were cutting-edge in 1933. And even today they are eerily effective when combined with the elegantly sinister power of Claude Rains's voice (in his no-show — except for the last few seconds — American screen debut).

Moreover, the film is full of director Whale's sardonic humor and outsider insights. We alternately identify with the anguished, arrogant "monster" and with the suspicious, insular society that refuses to embrace him. For, although the townsfolk of Iping (exemplified by Una O'Connor, at her screeching best) may be absurd and closed-minded, they are nonetheless innocents who do not deserve the terror visited upon them.

Although it is not Mr. Whale's best work, *The Invisible Man* is still an important early horror film. And if you need proof, all you need do is look at the dozens of times this ground-breaking thriller has been sequeled, spoofed, and otherwise imitated by movies over the years.

In most cases the imitation qualified as sincere (if opportunistic) flattery because the later, and

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always lesser, film's title included the phrase "invisible man" and the requisition of key plot elements was obvious and acknowledged in everything from *The Invisible Man Returns* (1940) to *Abbott and Costello Meet the Invisible Man* (1951) to *Memoirs of an Invisible Man* (1992).

Yet, in terms of plot and theme, none of the above-mentioned films are half as close to Whale's original *The Invisible Man* as a film released this past summer called *Hollow Man*.

Okay, no surprise there. I've discussed the cannibalistic nature of Hollywood before. And there is usually nothing so unoriginal as an FX-oriented summer blockbuster.

So, if cinematic kleptomania is the norm, what's the problem? Well, I like my robberies to be honest. Since many viewers in today's youth-oriented audience are ignorant of their film history, it is especially important for contemporary filmmakers to concede their debt to their predecessors — if not in the film's title and credits, at least in their press-notes and publicity interviews.

For a good example of this, I cite this past summer's superb *Chicken Run*. That film was a one-of-a-kind joy. Still, directors Nick Park and Peter Lord, and screenwriter Karey Kirkpatrick, all readily admitted that they were making "*The Great Escape* with Chickens," and cited numerous other P.O.W. films that influenced their work to anyone that would listen to them.

To my mind, that's "homage." In the case of *Hollow Man*, it's something much closer to plagiarism.

For, unless I missed something somewhere, not even a token recognition was afforded to Mr. Whale's *Invisible Man* by the men who made this past season's *Hollow* replicant.

Oh, that infamous pornographer of violence and sleaze, director Paul Verhoeven, *did* cite cultural influences. But (arrogant soul that he is) he claims that he discovered the source inspiration for his latest film in the work of ancient Greek philosopher, Plato.

According to Mr. Verhoeven, Plato theorized that morality is external and that "if he could get away with it" an "invisible" man would "rape and kill at will." (I don't remember enough of my Plato to say whether the old gent actually thought that way, but the Dutch director surely does!)

In not a single interview or production note that I saw or read did Mr. Verhoeven mention that he was,

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for all intents and purposes, doing a modern remake of James Whale's classic film. And neither did the few quotes that I saw from screenwriter Andrew W. Marlowe *(End of Days)* indicate his debt to Wells, Sherriff, and Wylie.

However, Marlowe said that he wanted to avoid the clichés of the invisible person genre. (Believe me, he didn't.) And he is quoted as finding his own story to be "an exciting morality play." (How modest of him.) If he admitted that his "morality play" was a rewrite of the original *Invisible Man*, I sure didn't catch it.

But the similarities between the two films are striking. Like the protagonist, Griffin (Rains), of the Whale film — and Wells's novel — *Hollow Man*'s central character is a youngish, driven, and highly ambitious scientist. Sebastian Caine (Kevin Bacon) is a dedicated, if ruthless, researcher, convinced of his own brilliance.

The head of a secret Pentagon research project to find an invisibility serum, Caine (like Griffin) decides to make himself the first human test subject. The "bio-quantum" self-erasure works well. But, like Griffin before him, Sebastian finds that reverting to normal is more complicated than he thought.

Like Griffin, Caine's protracted invisibility drives him insane...or, at least, seems to exacerbate his natural inclination to violent megalomania.

Griffin kills those who have threatened or betrayed him. And so does Caine. Needless to say, of course, the violence in *Hollow Man* is ten times more graphic than that in *The Invisible Man*. Color photography helps. Mr. Verhoeven *loves* blood. (In one scene, a floor is almost awash in corpuscles!) And we see numerous strangulations, garrotings, impalings, drownings, and other assaults, up close and personal, by the time the movie shudders to a close.

We also see a dog smashed up against the wall of a metal cage. (This is shot in heat-sensor photography, but is no less graphic and disturbing for the glowing colors of the image.) And because Mr. Verhoeven has a special appreciation for sexual violence, he has to give his hero/monster a chance to rape an innocent neighbor just for the hell of it.

To illustrate that the Griffin/Caine title character has irrevocably descended into madness and malevolence, some brutality is appropriate to the story. But the Marlowe/Verhoeven approach is to

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slaughter every character in the cast, in the most gruesome manner possible, as if they were making some direct-to-video slasher movie.

And, like the slasher movie, they also pull out every cliché of modern horror. Kill the black character first. Kill everyone else next. Only the spunky, sexy heroine (Elisabeth Shue, who looks embarrassed and depressed to be playing such a hackneyed role) and her boyfriend (Josh Brolin) will survive.

The spunky heroine will somehow manage to fight back successfully against the monster, against unbelievable — and I *do* mean unbelievable — odds. Shue's character bashes Caine (her former lover, natch). Then she burns him to a crisp. When that doesn't slow him down, she electrocutes him. But, still, he keeps coming back for more. (Maybe he *is* a god.)

And for some reason, somewhere along the way, the monster Caine gets part of his visible body back. Not all of it, of course. That wouldn't be gross enough. He regains just enough of a physical manifestation to make Kevin Bacon look like that plastic anatomy model little boys used to get for Christmas from education-minded relatives.

If Elisabeth Shue is sorely miscast, so is poor Kevin Bacon. He is a good actor, but he is singularly unconvincing as a mad scientist. And he is even less believable in the role of Monster-That-Would-Not-Die.

As everyone already knows, the special effects in *Hollow Man* are very well done. Besides the elaborate dematerialization of primate and human bodies, there are some very nice water and powdery fog effects that allow us to see Caine when he is invisible.

But good FX do not a good movie make. (As perhaps we viewers have already learned, from *The Haunting*. And *The Matrix*. And that big green monster from a couple of summers ago. And...) Certainly a few hundred state-of-the-art effects could not help *Hollow Man*, a movie even more empty than its title character.

I am outraged by Verhoeven and Marlowe's shameless attempt to rip off, without attribution, the classic work of a fiction master and his filmic interpreter. Still, Wells and Whale would probably prefer to be anonymously pirated than to have the memory of their impressive work sullied by association with Paul Verhoeven.

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Last April we sent a note to Ms. Lee's professors at Cornell, asking them to ease up on her coursework so she'll have more time to write her elegant tales. Said note seems to have had no effect, but Yoon Ha Lee still manages to find time in her studies to craft new stories such as the sf adventure that follows. This story marks her third appearance here in as many years and we look forward to continuing this trend well into the future.

Alas, Lirette

By Yoon Ha Lee

KENDRA KNEW WITH EVERY pulse of her blood what the people of Liadhe remembered best about Sharadon Brent: his steady eyes and pale hair and shining medals, hero of battles past...the scandal when he left Liadhe after the war to become a mercenary, wandering among foreign stars. *Warmonger,* they called him now, the man who loved bloodshed so deeply he abandoned his home in peacetime.

It was different for her. She remembered instead his strong hands drawing chord after chord, descant after shimmering descant, from his lute. An anachronism, that lute, requiring human hands to sing. Years ago Kendra had listened drowsily while Sharadon Brent tuned the seven strings, adjusted the frets, serenaded the night. His voice haunted her, too: as quiet in song as in speech, yet she had ached for it later, after they called him to the war against Veretys. Even today, in her faltering and tuneless way, she could hum his oldtime ayres and ballads.

Sometimes, while flying patrol with her taciturn ghost Falcon in the unvanquished night between Liadhe's burning stars, she wondered what

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it would have been like to serve military duty during wartime. At crossover points, where her wing's circuit met another's, they still danced the pointwise duel: ship against nimble ship, lances dimmed to a caress of coherent light, to third strike rather than destruction. She found a beauty in the duello, challenge-without-bloodshed, and told herself that killing had no place in this pleasure. Yet Kendra wondered if her father had felt differently. Her father, called Warmonger. He had not come home after the war's end, and so she had never had a chance to ask.

When last you lingered by the burning city,
When you saw my eyes were parched of pity,
I thought that you surely should depart;
I thought I no longer held your heart.

They pulled her from patrol duty unexpectedly, without warning; and so Kendra left her ship, the *Nightcry*, at the starport Spindance, making her way past the sleek, silent cradles of docked needleships to the scarred *Mirror's Edge.* She swallowed her apprehension long enough to say, "Sharadon Kendra reporting for duty." Most veterans had left military service after the war, and Kendra had met few of those who remained, let alone a legend.

The hatch slid open. "Edge acknowledges. Pleased to have you, Kendra," replied the ship's ghost in a surprisingly mild tenor. Then again, an AI could choose any voice it pleased. "We're to receive orders shortly."

Kendra nodded her thanks and entered, setting down her duffel when she reached her quarters. They were spartan, stripped of personality or luxury, as befitted a wartime vessel. "Do you know what this is about?" she asked Edge. She did not need to mention that she had originally been assigned with Falcon of the *Nightcry* to border patrol; Edge had access to the records. Highly unusual, that a young wingsecond should be promoted or requested to partner such an experienced ship. Kendra thought with a pang of Falcon, now obliged to accustom itself to a new partner, but she must follow where duty led her.

"Not precisely," said Edge, "but one might find some significance in the fact that I once partnered your father."

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She frowned, studying the instrument panels, the deck; they stared back blandly. Sharadon Brent had left Liadhe twelve years ago, as time was measured on a world called Liadhe's-heart, with nary a visit home. Kendra remembered envying the ghosts who had spent time with him, bound by battlefield necessity, and the old bitterness threatened to drown her again. "If I may ask — how well did you know him?"

"Well enough, before he was transferred to the *Doppelgänger.*" After an uneasy pause, the ghost said, "Incoming call."

Kendra made her way to the command console and its communications array. "I'm ready."

A woman's face blazed into color on the screen. She raised a hand in greeting. "Carredas Maro," she said without stating rank or position.

"Edge, ship's ghost."

Kendra raised her hand as well. "Sharadon Kendra — " Her voice faltered.

"Wingsecond on special duty," Edge filled in.

"Fortunate that you chose to continue military service last year, Kendra," said Maro, lowering her hand. "Had you not — "

Kendra followed suit. "Had I not, you would have sought me out, and I would still be here."

The woman smiled faintly. "True. As you may have guessed, this involves your father."

"I thought he was exiled a long time ago."

"Given an exile's status two days after they discovered he left," Edge corrected politely, with a ghost's concern for accuracy.

Maro nodded. "Yes. He has put us in a difficult situation."

"'Us'?" asked Kendra.

"Liadhe, then. If there's a difference."

She was silent. Then: "On what authority did you pull me into this?"

This time it was the woman's turn to pause, and she picked her words carefully. "Even exiles are, in the end, children of Liadhe. It doesn't matter how far they stray, how long they stay in foreign space. There are those of us charged with watching over them. They are Liadhen, and we don't abandon our own."

"No, but what if *they* abandon *you*?" She had not meant to reveal so

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much of her heart in one question, but she strove to keep her face calm even so.

"Would that it were so easy," said Maro. "What they do concerns us all."

"Details, madam," Edge said. "Details."

Kendra searched the woman's serene face. She knew Maro must stand very high indeed, if she was authorized to deal with exiles yet shrouded herself in obscurity. For the first time Kendra contemplated the idea of authority whose limits depended only on its wielder's restraint; who could check power that was silent and unseen? She shook away the thought. There must be silent, unseen levels of restraint as well.

"Since the treaty we have been at peace with Veretys," said Maro, "and there has been no trouble between our peoples. Not long ago, however, several mercenary companies — and mercenary independents — were hired by the governors of the Faienga League."

Kendra frowned, trying to remember where she had heard of Faienga. "That's border space, isn't it?"

"Yes, under the dominion of Veretys. Or was, the last I heard," the ghost said.

Maro sighed. "It shouldn't have affected you, or any other Liadhen. An internal matter, really: after an odd decade of agitating, the Faiengis finally revolted."

"One of the independents was Sharadon Brent, then," said Kendra.

"Yes."

"And Veretys is unhappy that a Liadhen, exiled though he be, is in Faienga's hire," Edge said flatly.

Maro's eyebrows quirked. "A conservative estimate of the situation. The Veretane contend — not entirely without justification — that Sharadon Brent's interference constitutes a violation of the treaty."

Kendra studied the space between the woman's brows, where there was no wrinkle of worry. Even so, she knew there were communications protocols that smoothed expressions and tones into unbroken composure or carefully calculated concern before transmission. There was no way to tell from her end. "They know he's an exile."

"They also know that Liadhe never abandons her own."

"Even when it's wiser?"

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"*He* would have been wiser to refuse the contract, no matter what Faienga offered."

Reluctantly, Kendra nodded: *best the battle never set ablaze,* said one of her father's favorite ballads. Favorite no longer, she feared.

"You're assuming he was an ordinary mercenary with ordinary motives," Edge pointed out. "No matter what else he was, what else he became, Brent was rarely...ordinary. Besides, he must be making a difference, or the Veretane would hardly bother pointing to the treaty."

"What are our orders?" Kendra asked.

"Find him," Maro said, lips pressing tight. "Find him and convince him to stop. Whatever it takes."

"By ourselves?" The ghost sounded startled.

"Who other?" A sigh escaped her. "You have both known him as a man, not a legend. A brilliant one, true, known for testing his tactics in blood — and winning. But a man all the same."

"Too true," it said slowly.

Kendra realized she had leaned forward and clasped her hands behind her back, bone straining against bone despite the barrier of flesh. "I will find him," she said, "if he is willing to be found."

Maro nodded. "Fair enough. The necessary data will be transmitted to you." Her image erased itself, leaving the blank screen to gaze at Kendra like a sleepless eye.

Lirette, my love, the war is distant flame —
It taught us how to murder, how to maim.
But you were right when you said we'd not learned
That those who kill become the ones worst burned.

The needleship was fleet, like all her kind; Liadhe soon became a scatter of past radiation in the sensors, a hope of starlight to come. Kendra and Edge threaded past outposts with dubious credentials, past battered prospectors' ships that haunted graveyard moons, and through territory no one but rogues had bothered to claim, all the while heading for the neutral space known as the Vein. Alone, bereft of wingmates, they had no safer trajectory toward Faienga.

Kendra worried about electromagnetic pulse weapons, which were

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capable of killing ghosts and which the Liadhen called *exorcists*. They were forbidden in Liadhe and Veretys, but what of those who lived in the Vein, bound by no honor but their own wants — who saw ghosts as lifeless patterns in a computer rather than comrades? Finally, two days from the Vein, she asked Edge.

"Don't worry," it said calmly. "EMP weapons are forbidden in the Vein. Having one in your armament is grounds for detainment or worse. Astrogation, communications, shipyard repairs and medical care — all these are only possible because of computers strung like beads of water on a net between the stars. Exorcists are an obvious terrorist's weapon. Besides, the cost of EMP that is reliable against generation after generation, genus after genus of electronics, is prohibitive in itself. Something for which I am grateful. It is not a lawless place, the Vein, despite what you may think."

"How do you know this?" Kendra wondered.

"The war against Veretys went further afield than most people realize," Edge answered, and said no more on the subject.

Strangers hailed them several times: *Here is hire, should you wish it,* as escort, as scout, as wardancer. The terms they offered varied little and were, Kendra came to realize, highly flattering by their standards. Edge declined each one courteously, and Kendra was ashamed that she had never learned the protocols common to the Vein or the ways of people other than her own and the Veretane.

"It doesn't surprise me," the ghost told her while she patiently checked the sensor readings after one such encounter, in case of ambush. "A common thing, to withdraw from other people's ways after a war and seek comfort in your own."

Kendra did not look up, knowing no eyes would meet hers and that Edge, like all ghosts, monitored her subtler reactions. "But childish, to think of the Veretane as the only other people in the sea of stars. Even when they are so different — "

"Not as different as you've been led to believe." Edge performed the glissade-and-arpeggio that she had learned to interpret as a sigh: a quote from one of Brent's own lute pieces. "Kendra, you've never left Liadhe before, and since the war's end patrols have been a formality. In the ways of battle the Veretane are very like us. Here, there is no duello, and our best

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hope would be to flee. There are other war paradigms, few of them so graceful."

She shivered, wondering at the *non sequitur.* "I have never been in battle, either."

"No, but you were trained to the duello, as were the Veretane. Here, in the Vein, the only grace is survival."

"A brutal place."

"A necessary one." Its tone became matter-of-fact "There must be a place to which the unwanted can escape and live by their own laws; and their laws are more strictly enforced because nothing else holds them together. Which means we must be careful."

This time Kendra did look up, seeking the memory of a man's face awaiting her gaze. But years had passed and that man must no longer be as she remembered him, either as the father who had raised her after his wife's untimely death or the war hero Liadhe had honored. "The unwanted. Like mercenaries, who perform a distasteful service. What the people of the Vein take us to be as we pass through."

"We are Liadhen."

"What does that have to do with anything?" she asked sharply.

"Exiles. Our exiles have come this way before and made for themselves a reputation. A good one, I should say, as these people might reckon it."

Hastily, she returned to the sensor displays, colors cool and unthreatening under her eyes, metal cool and unyielding under her hands.

You were hope when all I had was hate.
No longer could I beg of you to wait
Until the war was over for all time.
There never comes an end: *our greatest crime.*

Kendra had not realized, before this, how she depended on her wingmates' presence in the sensors, familiar patterns that said, *Here is friendship past the need of words.* From the chains of information, speculation, and gossip strung across the Vein's networks, Edge gathered word of Liadhe — however sparse — and of the Faienga League's rebellion. They spent the lonely hours sifting through their gleanings.

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"I wonder what the Veretane ambassadors mean to do," Kendra said while scanning the news summaries. "Wouldn't it be unwise to threaten war with Liadhe when they must already deal with dissent in their own territory?"

"Perhaps," said the ship's ghost, "what Liadhen help Faienga has received is significant enough that they haven't much choice. As I told Maro."

She laughed incredulously, though doubts upon doubts stirred her darker thoughts; so far the Faiengis had held off the Veretane fleet sent to subdue them. "Other independents? Exiles? Maro mentioned nothing of others whom the Veretane considered to be breaking our treaty. Surely one man couldn't make such a difference, alone and away from his people?"

"He became a legend for a reason." It played a phrase from "Lirette, My Love," melody pitted against melody upon a single lute's strings. "They forgot his skills as a musician, great as they were, because his skill in war was even greater."

And yet, Kendra thought, was Brent so wrong? Edge had summarized Faienga's history for her: a confederation of sectors that became a Veretane protectorate after the War of Shrouds, yearning toward independence ever since. In battle against Liadhe, Veretys had honored the duello and its conventions, but in putting down the Faiengis claim they denied the right to challenge. Even now the league sought support, and in the Vein the call for mercenaries still circulated.

She said softly, "Warmonger, who troubles us yet." *Oh, Father.* Kendra had discovered that parents rarely were as you saw them in childhood, but a thread of disbelief still wove through her thoughts of Brent. Disbelief, and hope.

"There is the treaty." The ghost's voice gave no indication of its opinion, if any. "He knew about it and he chose to take the risk that Veretys would object."

"He had to have a reason," she insisted. "My father may be the Warmonger" — her voice nearly broke — "but he wouldn't have done this without reason. Even if that reason were the glory to be had in such a fight. What if the Faiengis are right?" Kendra shook her head, shoulders drooping. "And surely he would have known that someone would come to stop him."

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"Or try."

"Is that why Maro sent us? Because he knew us once and might have mercy?"

The ghost paused, Kendra was sure, only for her benefit. "Perhaps it was also a kindness on her part. Have you never wondered what became of Brent?"

"I knew."

"Parts of it, you mean."

She bowed her head. "I would have liked to see him once, just once, before he left. He was the only one I had as kin-by-blood; he called me 'little one' even when I was not so little; and he decided to go away."

"He was your father and he loved you. Perhaps he meant to avoid hurting you more."

"What do you mean?"

"He was your father," Edge repeated, "and parents do what they must, for their children's sake." The ghost turned the conversation to other topics, and Kendra questioned it no further.

Her dreams turned more and more often to the patrols she had left behind, the terse communications she had shared with her wingmates, the duello's light-spindled displays; an instrument-crafter's shop she had visited while on leave, running a finger along a silken string and wishing she had inherited her father's gift for music; a null-g garden arranged as a three-dimensional labyrinth, the transparent pipes of water and nutrients glowing like a cat's-cradle, where she and a lover had met; voices speaking Liadhe's languages in dialects other than her own that were nonetheless familiar. Edge played music for her that it had learned from Brent or discovered on its own, which eased the ache within her: galliards and fantasias, Ras Niessa's three syrinx concertos, a fractal symphony, preludes and pavanes.

When the *Mirror's Edge* had nearly emerged from the Vein near Faienga, the ghost said, "Incoming transmission," at the moment Kendra found massed starships in the sensors. The readings struck a chord of delight from her heart before she remembered that no Liadhen fleet would have ventured so far from home and that the ships were Veretane Tusk-class needleships, a postwar design. She did not bother scanning them; their heavy shielding — and their numbers — made the provocation inadvisable.

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"Is this one of the times when abandoning the duello would be wise?" Kendra asked, only half in jest. Suddenly the thought of testing tactic against tactic, reflex against reflex, sent a glissade of ice along her skin. She had never sought to learn the dynamics of war, the rhythms of danger, the tempo of death. She had no desire to discover firsthand the perils that had drawn her father away from Liadhe.

"If we're attacked."

"Let us answer first, then."

The *Mirror's Edge* settled into a lazy roll, exposing its flank to Veretane fire: *We are not here to fight.* Two of the Veretane ships broke formation to echo the gesture.

In duel against other patrols in Liadhe, Kendra and Falcon had only worried about their own opponent. But here she and Edge had no wingmates, no guarantee — as in the duello — that the other three-and-twenty ships would remain passive.

"Responding to transmission," said Edge, then fell silent.

An image snapped onto the screen. Kendra raised her hand in greeting to the man, whose raptor insignia indicated that he commanded the Tusk fleet. He raised his own hand in response, then lowered it. "Are you affiliated with Liadhe, lady?" he asked in a tongue common to both their nations.

Mystified by his phrasing, she said, "We are Liadhen, yes."

"Faienga is interdicted."

From what she and Edge had learned through the Vein's networks, Kendra knew that ways around the interdict existed. "Your government challenged ours because Sharadon Brent involved himself in your affairs." She wished she knew how well she had chosen her words, but the commander was nodding, and Edge had not interrupted her. "We are here to deal with him."

Whatever it takes, Maro had told them.

"Forgive the question," he said, "but you are not a mercenary?"

Kendra drew in a breath, held it, set it free. "No. You challenged Liadhe and we are Liadhe's response."

"Pass, then," said the commander, shaking his head slowly, "and if the Warmonger does not leave with you — " A smile like a knife's edge thinned his lips. "Would you take an escort?"

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It couldn't have been so easy, Kendra thought. "An escort?" she repeated.

"It is advisable."

"Required, you mean."

"When the two are one, my lady Liadhen, why quibble over distinctions?"

"We accept," Edge's voice, stripped of inflection, intervened. "I presume the Faiengis will ask questions before firing upon us?"

The commander's smile blunted but slightly. "Keep your reflexes well-honed. But you are Liadhen, both of you; that ought to be enough, where the Warmonger is concerned." He saluted them Veretane-style, fist to shoulder — Kendra imagined that regret flickered in his eyes — and cut the transmission.

One of the Tusk ships detached from the fleet and invited them to follow. *Their wingsecond,* thought Kendra with a pang, tracking its motion and thinking of Falcon, of a simpler life on patrol. No names were given: a subtle discourtesy, but one she was not apt to protest. "We're coming," she said aloud, and the *Mirror's Edge* accelerated to match course with the Tusk. *Oh, Father, I'm coming.*

THEY SENT a message hurtling before them into Veretys, into the unwilling part of Veretys that was Faienga: *Liadhen vessel* Mirror's Edge *and an escort. Liadhen vessel* Mirror's Edge *and an escort. Request permission to speak with Sharadon Brent, exile. Liadhen vessel* Mirror's Edge *and an escort....*

"Incoming transmission," said Edge. One of the monitors blinked, displaying a course further along Faienga's border. "We are required to follow this exactly. The Faiengis will hold their fire but no guarantee is made of safe passage."

"They will be tracking us all the way."

"Of course."

Kendra's eyes narrowed. "Might there be an ambush, once we are away from the Veretane fleet? By the time the Veretane become aware that something has happened, it will be too late for us...and our escort."

"And what danger can we be?" the ghost asked reasonably. "We come

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to parley in response to a challenge, and dare not stray beyond that lest Liadhe embroil herself further in a civil conflict."

The escort continued to pace them, sleek and inscrutable. Uneasily, Kendra wondered what weaponry lay concealed beneath its shielding. The Veretane upgraded their military ships regularly, despite the expense; she dared make only the vaguest assumptions about its capabilities.

Kendra's heart hammered anticipation as they continued into Faienga even as she tried to untangle her thoughts. *Do you still remember your music, Father? Through the years did you ever think of those you left behind?*

Sharadon Brent, who threatened to bring war to Liadhe again.

Liadhe, which never abandoned her own, no matter the price.

Faienga, which sought a law of its own.

Veretys, which denied the Faiengis challenge and challenged Liadhe in turn.

"Who is right?" she asked Edge, her eyes tuned to the sensors and the flickering, constantly updated starmaps that told her they approached the Miello salient.

"What do you mean?"

"The rebellion. I know so little."

"Would it help, knowing more?"

Kendra considered. "Yes. No. It would make things less simple. But I grow tired of not knowing."

"You may tire less of it when you know more." Its tone shifted from compassion to caution. "If this is an ambush, Kendra, we have no hope of escape."

"Yes," she said after a pause. The sensors spoke of a well-deployed fleet, for all that its ships were of every imaginable type: agile wardancers, battered cruisers, carriers with their accompanying drones, scouts and needleships and more. One of them leapt out at her from the display: a Liadhen needleship. "Father," she breathed.

"I see that the *Doppelgänger* is here," said Edge. "Several ships among the Faiengis fleet are targeting us."

The display had come alight with amber warnings. The Veretane escort no longer echoed their movements but angled itself—protectively, Kendra would have said, had she not doubted its motives. "Request

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communications with Sharadon Brent and — Edge, what is the name of *Doppelgänger*'s ghost?"

"Unknown." Before she had time even to blink — ghosts recognized each other very well where human memory often failed — it continued, "Requesting parley."

The sensors marked five Faiengis ships as being within range of their lances, two more within range of their missiles. Kendra realized she was holding her breath and let it go. The rebels and their mercenaries could scatter *Mirror's Edge* into soulless particles before they returned a shot, and she knew it.

"Incoming response."

The man on the viewscreen looked achingly familiar, achingly different, as though eleven years had burned away his memories of home. He had kept his Liadhen uniform but none of the medals were in evidence, and when he spoke, his voice was low and weary. "Kendra? Little one?" His eyes, very like Kendra's own, searched her face. "The stars have mercy." Jerkily, he raised his hand as though he might reach across the vacuum that separated them.

"Father," she said, and then, self-consciously: "Sir." She told herself that the burning behind her eyes had nothing to do with tears. Inanely, all she could think of to say was, "Do you still play the lute, Father?"

The man bowed his head. "I no longer have a lute, nor am I capable of playing. I would play you, sing you one last song, if I could. It has been so many years, little one."

Blinking, she glanced down at the sensors to compose herself; wondered briefly as to the escort's rationale in drawing away from them. Now, judging by the scans, the Faiengis were divided between targeting her and the Veretane ship. "Veretane challenged Liadhe, Father." Her voice trembled. "The treaty — "

The Tusk's power signatures came suddenly ablaze, preparing for a strike.

"Incoming — " Edge began to say.

"Watch out!" Kendra cried without knowing what the Tusk intended. She did not recognize the signature, did not know what weapon would be fired —

"There's no time." Suddenly the man's voice became cold and crisp. "Little one, little one, please forgive — " The transmission terminated.

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"Brace for acceleration!" Edge told Kendra a moment before the *Mirror's Edge* came about sharply.

Blood swam across her vision until the acceleration leveled off. "We're being jammed," she managed to say between gasps. "We received a final databurst from *Doppelgänger*. What's happening?" The Faiengis had fired on the Tusk, whose signature grew steadily brighter.

"I unscrambled the databurst. I am following the given evasive maneuvers."

A wardancer and two corvettes had detached themselves from the fleet to accompany the *Mirror's Edge* on her flight, shielding them. For a sickening second, Kendra thought the Faiengis meant to destroy them. Before she could sort out anything else, the sensors caught a sudden vicious flare: a ship's swansong in frequencies of radiation rather than sound.

"Exorcist," she whispered. Had they moved a second later and in the wrong direction, the pulse would have killed Edge and left her stranded among strangers.

Tears conspired to hide the display from her before she even knew who had died. She wiped them away, unnerved by Edge's silence as much as anything else. A battle was unfolding, the Faiengis mobilizing to greet the Veretane waiting past the Miello salient; and the Veretane escort, not *Doppelgänger*, failed to appear in the sensors. The Warmonger's ship itself moved unthinkingly in a line against the backdrop of stars and dust.

She fought with the tears without understanding why; the tears won.

My hands hold nothing but the blood and dust
Of dying soldiers, blood and dark bloodlust.
Lirette, I left you for a war I rue —
Alas, Lirette, I've no songs left for you.

"Will he be coming, then? Coming back to Liadhe?" asked Kendra when the tears had stopped, though a terrible foreboding gripped her heart.

"He can't. He's dead. That's a dead ship, Kendra."

She caught her breath. "No. The Veretane couldn't have." Desperately, Kendra checked the logs for an account of the blood-blurred moments she had missed. She froze, trying to deny what they told her.

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"No," she repeated, more softly. "The Tusk destroyed itself for that pulse. And Brent knew. He knew and warned us instead of getting out of the way, and it cost him the *Doppelgänger*'s ghost." He had chosen to make himself a target for the Tusk rather than giving it time to redirect the pulse and cause more damage.

EMP weapons are forbidden in the Vein, Edge had told her. But not, it appeared, forbidden in Veretys or the space they called their own.

Silently, the wardancer and corvettes accompanied them, leading the way — where, she could not guess. Edge chose to follow them, and she had no strength to protest.

"He's dead," the ghost said again. "Do you remember the battles he won, Kendra? Impossible battles that became victories under his leadership?"

Dry-eyed, she looked down at her hands. Not a musician's hands, hers. "I heard about them after they happened, yes. He should not have survived."

"He didn't. Sharadon Brent died in his eighth battle. It was after that he was transferred to *Doppelgänger,* or so they said."

"That's impossible." She had seen him, had she not? Seen him barely minutes ago, for all that the years had separated them. But it would be a trivial matter for a ghost to imitate a man, to manipulate images and vocal recordings, in ship-to-ship communications.

I no longer have a lute, nor am I capable of playing.

"I was there," said Edge.

She squeezed her eyes shut.

"Sharadon Brent died — and he lived again, as the *Doppelgänger*'s ghost. Do you understand, Kendra? It was a desperate measure. He was too well-known, too well-regarded, for Liadhe to lose him. War needs its heroes. And so they brought him back, what they could salvage of him, but he could never go home...and so he left. Warmonger. Do you understand?"

"An exorcist," she said numbly. And the ghost had called her *little one.* Had asked her forgiveness before warning them away.

Edge played a strain from a dirge. "Yes. Because the Veretane must have found out, and fools that we were, we gave them the opening they had set up. We were meant to die as well and none would be the wiser. Brent's death would have satisfied Liadhe's honor in the treaty."

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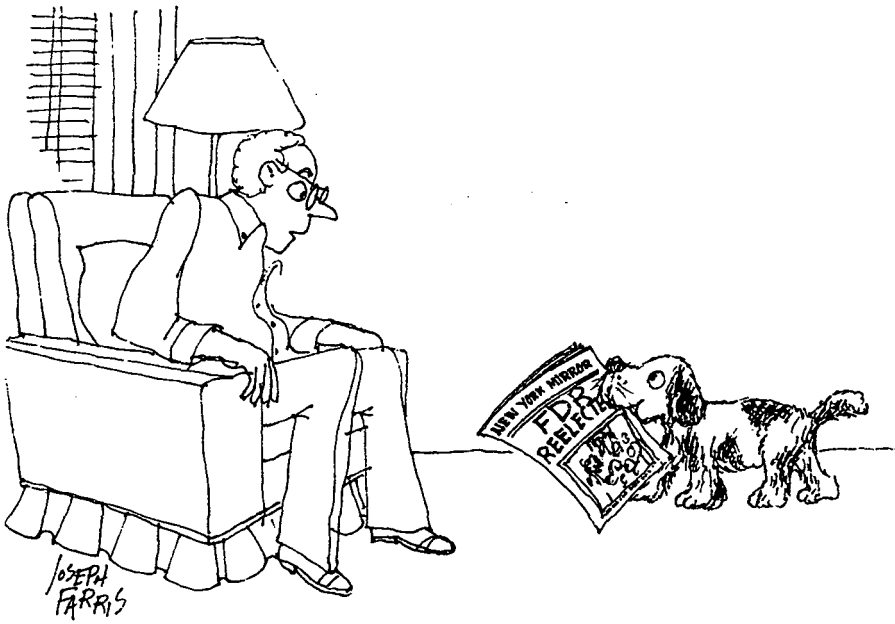
For a long time Kendra sat there, silent, thinking of shipmates she had known only during patrol, people — like Maro? — she had met only indirectly, people who might pose as human if they avoided face-to-face contact. People who were ghosts and braved battle alone, partnerless. People like her father; ghost or human, it hardly mattered to her.

"Do we return home, Kendra?" said Edge. "Or do we stay? Because if word reaches Liadhe, she will have no choice but to respond, with Brent our first casualty. Or we can leave Liadhe ignorant and avoid another war."

Warmonger. But perhaps some battles were worth fighting. "We return," she said. If her father had sacrificed himself for their sake, she could do no less than bring word of his death back to Liadhe.

"I miss him, too," said the ghost, responding to her tone, and then they were speeding past the Miello salient, away from the slaughter and toward their home.

for Paul Urayama



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A native of Arizona, Ray Vukcevich has lived in Eugene, Oregon, for many years now. His offbeat and witty stories include "Mom's Little Friends," "The Finger," and most recently, "Poop." He hasn't been writing much short fiction lately, not since he turned his talents to longer forms (his debut novel, The Man of Maybe Half-a-Dozen Faces, *garnered good reviews last year, and he's nearly finished with a sequel). This new one is a delightfully spooky piece.*

Whisper

By Ray Vukcevich

AND THEN SHE FIRED HER parting shot. "And not only *that*," she said as if "*that*" hadn't been quite enough, "you snore horribly!"

"I do not," I said. "I definitely do not snore." I was talking to her back. "You're making it up!" I was talking to the door. "Someone else would have mentioned it!" I was talking to myself.

Mistakes were made, relationships fell apart, and hurtful things were said. Life was like that.

In the days that followed, I rearranged all the furniture. I threw out everything in the refrigerator. I bought new spices — savory, anise, cumin, cracked black pepper — and packaged macaroni and cheese and powdered soups. Anchovies. Things Joanna didn't like. I left the toilet seat up all the time and dropped my clothes wherever I took them off. I got a new haircut and collected brochures for a getaway to Panama. I looked at a red convertible but didn't buy it.

Her crack about me snoring wouldn't leave me alone, probably because it poked something that had always worried me. My father had

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snored. I remembered listening to him snore all the way down the hall and around the corner. I always thought it must be awful to be in there with him. Maybe it ran in the family, like baldness or alcoholism.

The solution, once it hit me, seemed obvious. I would record myself sleeping. I had nothing that would record such a long time, so I went to an audio store and bought an expensive machine that would do the job. I used some of the money I'd saved by not buying the red convertible.

I set it up on the dresser across the room at the foot of the bed. I poured myself a nightcap, drank it during the eleven o'clock news, brushed my teeth, turned on the recorder, got into bed and squirmed around restlessly for over an hour listening to the possibly imaginary whir and hiss of magnetic tape moving through the mechanism.

The next day, there was no time to check the tape as I hurried through my morning ritual and left for work. I was tempted, but I couldn't afford to be late. Then I got busy and didn't think about it again until bedtime the next night.

I made myself a complicated drink and a plate of crackers with anchovies and cheese and sat down on the foot of my bed. I don't know exactly what I expected. I was a little apprehensive. I stretched up and switched on the machine.

There were the sounds of me changing positions and sighing as I tried to get to sleep. I listened and ate a few crackers then stood up and held down the fast-forward button.

There were long periods of silence. No snoring. The house was quiet, too, with that late night stillness that isn't really so quiet when you finally listen, and the two silences got mixed together until I was listening hard and eating crackers and not caring about the crumbs in my bed.

I continued sampling a moment here and there and then moving on.

"Ah ha," I said. "I knew it."

There was a long embarrassing fart an hour or so into the night, but absolutely no snoring. I heard something move in the kitchen like stuff settling in the plastic trash bag, a totally familiar sound. In fact, I couldn't tell if it was on the tape or had just happened in real time. I heard the house creaking and the distant sounds of traffic and once an auto horn. Several hours later, a siren screamed in the distance, and my sleeping self moaned. The 3:00 A.M. train went by five miles to the south. I had stopped hearing

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that whistle a long time ago. It was comforting somehow to hear it again. I speeded the tape forward.

I was home free.

Joanna had been jerking me around.

But then a woman said, "shush!' and giggled softly, and I gasped and jerked my hand up and drenched the front of my shirt with my drink.

I looked around wildly, thinking it was Joanna talking, thinking maybe it hadn't been on the tape, thinking maybe she was standing right behind me, but most of me knew she wasn't there. And the superspeed scenario I played in my mind where she'd sneaked into my bedroom last night to talk on my tape was stupid. Besides, it hadn't even been her voice.

"Just look at him," the voice whispered.

I could hear someone moving around in the room. The rustle of clothing, the bump of a leg maybe hitting the side of the dresser or the chair by the window

"Sure," a man whispered, "he's adorable."

The woman giggled again.

Then nothing.

I carefully put my glass down on the floor. I felt cold. My ears were ringing and my breathing was fast and shallow. I pulled off my wet shirt and threw it at the bathroom door.

The tape still moved but was silent.

I sat there listening for maybe an hour. Then I told myself I had imagined the whole thing. I got up and rewound the tape and played it again.

"Just look at him," the woman whispered.

I spent the rest of the night listening to every inch of the tape. You would think listening to over eight hours of tape would take more than eight hours, but I made good use of the fast-forward button, and by morning, I was pretty sure that little snatch of conversation was all there was.

I considered calling in sick, but then I would probably fall asleep, and I wasn't ready to fall asleep yet. I showered and shaved and got dressed.

Things were too bright outside. The feeling was an old memory of all-nighters in college and crawling out into the daylight finally and feeling like everything must surely be an elaborate set in a movie about someone

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else. I remembered the way Abby, my first true love, looked in those days, warm young woman, zoomed-in tight, big distorted nose, morning close up, sleepy head, kiss kiss, an echoing dress store dummy somehow moving, smiling too big, too many teeth. Good morning, Sunshine. And later, the coffee so deeply black and hot against my own teeth. Eggs over easy so you can paint bright yellow daffodils with your toast. Thick slabs of bacon.

"You're doing the Zen breakfast thing, aren't you?" Abby bumped me with her shoulder. We sat side by side at the counter because the place was always too full to get a booth in the morning.

Where had she gone? I remembered dreaming over and over again that I had accidentally killed her and hidden her body in a closet or out in the barn or under the bed and for years and years and years I was forced to take care of it so no one would ever find out. I finished school and got good work, met a woman named Louisa, married her, fathered children, lost them but got weekends, met Joanna, and all the time playing a complicated juggling game involving plastic bags and big trunks to keep Abby's body hidden.

I suddenly wondered if that was Abby on the tape.

"More coffee?"

"What?" I snapped out of it long enough to nod and smile at the woman with the coffee pot. "Yes, please."

I looked around. This was not the diner from my past. This was the restaurant down the block from my office. I never stopped in here for breakfast, but judging by the remains on my plate, I had stopped in for breakfast today. I glanced at my watch. I was late. I finished my coffee too quickly, burned my mouth, left a tip, paid the bill, and hurried off.

Out in the bright morning crowd of busy people all moving so deliberately toward important tasks, I knew very well I hadn't killed Abby and kept her body hidden all these years. That was just something I had dreamed more than once. But I was drawing a blank on just what had happened to her. I couldn't really bring her face into sharp focus in my mind. That probably wasn't her voice on the tape.

At my desk, I made a mental list of the things that might be happening to me. The most obvious was that I was losing my mind. Next, I might be haunted; the voices might be ghosts. And finally, there was the conspiracy

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angle — someone really was sneaking into my bedroom at night and watching me sleep. But if that were true why hadn't Joanna complained about spooky visitors instead of making up a story about me snoring?

I didn't feel crazy. In fact, after the sleepless night, my mind seemed unusually sharp. Everything was bright and moist. I could see every hair on my arm. I could still taste the bacon from breakfast even if I couldn't remember eating it. I could hear my coworkers talking in low tones across the room.

There was nothing to do about the supernatural. If that was what was happening, there was no defense. That's what makes it the supernatural in the first place. It's not like an understandable force that is simply too powerful, like a bully you can overcome by pumping iron and eating your Wheaties. There is no kung fu you can do when it comes to the supernatural. It is irrational and absolutely unpredictable. If there were rules that worked, the supernatural would be science. The truly supernatural must be truly meaningless.

That only left conspiracy, but I couldn't imagine how it would be possible.

Nevertheless, my exercise in logic made me feel a little better, and in spite of the voices and in spite of a sleepless night, I got caught up in work and by early afternoon, I realized I'd forgotten all about the tape. That realization reminded me of the tape, of course, and I laughed, and everyone gave me a funny look, and I just shook my head and said, "Nothing. Sorry. Just a thought. Nothing."

For dinner, I stopped in at the same restaurant where I had had breakfast. Then I went home and wandered around the house picking things up and putting them down again. I turned on the TV.

TV was often my meditation. The challenge was to make a coherent program out of a single utterance or exclamation or exploding building or whatever from each channel. No matter what was happening, you could linger on a channel no longer than a sentence. You had to pay attention, and it took hours to get a meaningful exchange, but once I did get something meaningful, everything fell into place. The universe became a Buddha smile, and I reached a place of blue clarity. Hours passed, and while I could not remember exactly what the experience had been about, I always felt as if I'd accomplished something by the time I stopped and

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pushed the dirty dishes to one side so I could rinse a glass and pour a couple of fingers of scotch and put a fresh tape on the fancy recording machine in the bedroom. I could have just recorded over the old one, but I wanted to avoid ambiguity. I gulped down the scotch, brushed my teeth and undressed. I switched on the recorder, and got into bed.

"I'm going to sleep now," I said out loud so I'd have a reference point. I snuggled deeper into the covers and passed through the bed and into a dream in which all the people I had lost to death were back again, but changed. Not exactly zombies, just back and a little different. In the dream I had to make allowances for them. I'd say things like, "You'll have to excuse her, she's been dead." I'd say things like, "The way he moves certainly is *not* creepy, he was dead only yesterday." They would all come over to my house where I would feed them and teach them things and they would pretend they didn't know me and wouldn't seem the least bit grateful for my help, but I would forgive them because they'd been dead and were now trying to get back into the swing of things.

The next morning I called in sick. Judy, who took my call, wasn't surprised. "You didn't look so hot yesterday," she told me.

I popped open a beer and rewound the tape.

Forward, pause, play. Snort, moan, honk, fart, shuffle, shift, yada yada yada. Forward, pause, play.

"He's paralyzed," the woman whispered.

"How can you tell?" the man asked.

"Look at his eyes moving," she said. "There is a mechanism that paralyzes his body when he dreams. Otherwise he might get up and walk around."

The man chuckled.

"Careful with that," the woman said.

"I just need to rest," the man said.

"You shouldn't...."

"Shush," the man said.

She sighed. "Okay, make room for me, too," she whispered. "Careful with the covers. Okay, I'll take the front. Easy, now, easy."

"If he wakes up now," the man whispered, "he'll be looking right into your face."

"Hmmm," she said.

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"Can he smell your breath?"

"Hmmm," she said.

"I'm going to pinch him."

"Don't!"

"Just joking," the man whispered.

Then nothing.

My heart was beating too fast. I listened to the silence and small night sounds until my beer was gone. I crushed the can and stood up and hit the fast-forward button.

The voices didn't occur on the tape again.

I checked all the windows and all the doors but I knew they were okay. When I got home, I always made a quick tour of the house to make sure there were no intruders lurking. I always locked the bathroom door before getting into the shower. I didn't go to bed without putting the security chain on. The movies have trained us not to make too many stupid mistakes. I had always felt secure in my own house. I'd lived there for years. I knew every inch of the place.

I went around carefully tapping all the walls looking for secret passages. I knew it was stupid. I just couldn't think of anything else to do. There was no way anyone could get in when I was asleep. How would they know when I was asleep in the first place?

I needed a second opinion. I had to let someone else listen to the tape. But who could I trust? Maybe a stranger would be best. But how would I get a stranger to listen to a tape and how could I trust what they said?

I knew who should listen to the tape. I had known from the moment I came up with the idea that someone should listen to it. I sat there staring down at my shoes saying over and over again, "Just do it. Just do it." Okay. I got up and ran the tape back to the point just before the woman first spoke. I took it out of the machine and put it in a box and wrapped the box and addressed it to Joanna at her office. I didn't know where she was living.

I wrote a note. "Joanna, please listen to this and tell me what you hear."

I called the messenger service I sometimes used at work. An hour later the messenger arrived, and I gave him the tape and some money.

There were other things I could do while I waited. I put a fresh tape in the machine. I found a sack of flour back behind my new spices. I could

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spread it all over the bedroom floor and see if there were footprints in the morning. I opened the bag. But wait. If I spread the flour now, I would probably step in it many times on my way to the bathroom, which reminded me to open another beer. I took the beer and the flour into the bedroom. I put the flour down by the recorder. I would spread it just before bed. Maybe Joanna would have called before then, though. Maybe whatever she had to say would solve the problem.

"Oh, yeah," I'd say. "That's it. Boy, is my face red. I should have thought of it myself."

I could do something else, too, but it would take more courage. I could leave them a message. The danger in that was that they didn't seem to know that I could hear them. What would they do if they found out? I was completely helpless in their company. Maybe I shouldn't let them know that I knew. I was a kind of eavesdropper really. Maybe they wouldn't like it.

They might find out anyway. One of these nights, they might notice the tape machine. And surely if I spread flour all over the floor it would tip them off.

The day passed. I ate stuff from cans for lunch. I got no reply from Joanna. I must be pretty far down on her priority list these days.

I couldn't find anything else to eat for dinner so I skipped it. There was still beer, but not too much.

I meditated with the TV for a few hours but never could achieve meaning. Around eleven I decided I really would leave them a message. It was night again and too quiet and bedtime and I had to do something. I tore a piece of paper from a notebook and wrote, "Who are you?" in big bold letters.

Now what? Should I pin it to my chest? What if they didn't find it? I wadded the paper up and tossed it in the trash.

I could write really big letters on the wall.

I dug through kitchen drawers but found nothing I could use to make big letters. I checked the bathroom. Women never leave a place without a trace. Maybe there would be a lipstick. There wasn't. So much for generalizations.

I had pink stomach stuff but it looked too runny, and I had colorless roll-on deodorant, so the wall wouldn't sweat, but you'd have to smell the country fresh letters to puzzle out the message.

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Ah ha. An old old bottle of tincture of merthiolate. Good god, I bought that before I met Abby. What was the expiration date? Most of the label was gone, but it looked like 1980. I had put the stuff on countless cuts. It still had a nice sting to it. This was one of those products that one bottle lasts you a lifetime. The company had probably gone out of business.

I stood on the bed and using the little plastic applicator started my message again on the wall. Rats. The applicator was too small. It would take forever. I poured merthiolate into my hand and smacked my hand onto the wall and dragged it down and up and down and up in a big dripping orange double-u. Okay. The rest went pretty quickly.

Who are you?

If they looked at me, and I seemed to be pretty much all they did look at, they could not fail to see my message.

My hands were orange. The orange stain wouldn't come off with soap and water. To hell with it.

How about the flour?

Okay, okay. But do it carefully. Get undressed first. Start at the bathroom door and work your way back to the bed. Yes, like that. When you get to the bed just toss the empty flour sack out of the bedroom and get into bed. That's it. Nothing could move across there without leaving a mark. Good. Good. Goddamn it, you forgot to pee.

I plopped down on the bed. I tossed the empty flour sack over the side. I took a deep breath. Then I walked straight across the flour to the bathroom. One straight path. I would use the same one coming back. Anything off that path would be my visitors.

Except that after I used the bathroom and carefully walked back to the bed, I realized I would need one more path to the dresser so I could turn on the recorder. Okay, one more. I walked to the dresser, turned on the machine, and walked back to the bed. Two paths. Footprints going in both directions. I got into bed.

I stared up at the ceiling feeling like an absolute idiot. I would have to get up and make another path if I wanted to turn off the light. I got up and walked to the light switch and flipped it off. Then I made my way back in the dark. I knew I was not keeping a straight path. And as I walked, it occurred to me to wonder how they would see my message in the dark. I had probably ruined the wall for nothing. I stopped and closed my eyes to

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think about it. If they could see me, they could probably see the wall, but what about the orange letters? Would orange letters be visible to ghosts who could see in the dark? Maybe it would be like red light to fish. You put a red light in your aquarium and the fish all think it's night and you can watch them and they don't know you're watching.

I opened my eyes and stumbled forward and saw the street glow through the bathroom window and realized that I'd gotten way off the path back to the bed. The flour seemed mostly pointless now.

I turned and then stood peering through the dark at the bed. It didn't look entirely empty. Those shapes could be my pillows. The slight movement I saw like the quivering of a horse after a good run might be just the kind of thing you see in the dark. I took a step back.

"Aren't you coming to bed?" she said.

I cried out.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you."

"Joanna?"

"I heard the tape of you snoring," she whispered. "Kind of a strange apology, but what the hell. Come on, hop in. It's late."

I sat down on the edge of the bed. She put her cool hand on my shoulder. I crawled in beside her. She pulled me in close.

"Is that really you, Joanna?" I asked.

"Of course it isn't, you moron," the man behind me said.

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Rick Heller and his wife Cindy live outside of Boston. Since he made his debut here last March with "Loyal Puppies," he has left his job designing computer systems for cooks in the Marine Corps and is now in the employ of a company that makes online shopping easier. He is currently at work on a suspense novel entitled Smart Genes.

Mr. Heller says this story, written in homage to Jules Verne's Michael Strogoff, *grew out of a trip to Paris he and his wife made recently. He has not yet ascertained whether Mustafa Azimov, the man honored by the Azimov Mosque in Kazan, was any relation to the Good Doctor.*

The Mind Field

By Rick Heller

I WAS ON DUTY AT THE Foreign Ministry, in my old office at the Quai d'Orsay, when an urgent call came in from Tatarstan. An officer of the *Armée de l'Air* appeared on the screen, a gash visible above his eyebrow. "There's been an attack on the delegation," he said. "Fleury has been killed, several others wounded."

Jean-Dominique Fleury, dead? It seemed unbelievable. When we were young diplomats, Jean-Do led me one night on a drunken excursion through the clubs of Brazzaville in the Congo Republic. We met two beautiful Peace Corps workers from the United States, and after a wild ride back to the hotel, made love to them in the same room.

Death and Jean-Do did not belong together. But the report was reliable, and the news would be broadcast soon by *Agence France-Presse*. Margherita, Jean-Do's widow, would have to be told immediately.

I selected Margherita's entry from my phone contact list. She answered the call right away. She was outdoors, in the Place des Vosges by the look of it.

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"Margherita, it's Roland. Something's happened."

"Something bad?" The image went jerky due to her attempts to juggle the phone.

"The worst." I paused a moment to compose myself, so my voice wouldn't crack. "Jean-Dominique. I'm sorry, he's dead."

"Oh, my God."

"The motorcade was attacked."

"Could there be a mistake? Could he still be alive?"

"I'm afraid not." It would be hard for her, raising two children on her own. "Margherita, if there is anything you need, you know you can rely on me."

"Thank you, Roland."

My next call was to the Minister, who would no doubt contact the President. I kept the staff until 21:00 that evening, getting the latest from Tatarstan and arranging for the return of Jean-Do's remains. Later, as I cleared my desk, I received a call from the Elysée Palace. My presence was requested at a breakfast meeting the next morning.

When I arrived at the Elysée, Jacques Roux-Levy, the President's Special Counselor, was the only one there. He was sporting a ridiculous goatee that made him look like a twentieth-century revolutionary agitator.

"How avant-garde, Jacques! A nice touch," I said. "Where is everyone else?"

"No one else has been invited," Roux-Levy said.

I was struck dumb. I'd seen the President many times before as Jean-Do's deputy; now I would meet with him on my own. Not that I'd been terribly impressed by the man up until now. How had Chavanne amassed a fortune of twenty million euros when he'd been on the government payroll for the last fifteen years? By steering a few deals to this contractor or that, perhaps?

Roux-Levy led me into the President's office, where we settled down around a small table piled high with brioche.

"Good morning, Monsieur Jolivet." The President shook my hand. "This affair in the Volga — it's getting worse and worse. Now it has taken our Jean-Dominique."

The President looked at me intently. At that moment, he no longer

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seemed to me like Marcel Chavanne, former mayor of Bordeaux. He was heir to De Gaulle and Mitterand; he embodied the Republic. I knew I'd be unable to turn down any request he made.

"But affairs of state are relentless," President Chavanne said. "The Russian and Tatar Presidents have accepted French mediation. We must not fail. Our reputation as a serious player internationally is at stake. Are you prepared to take over the assignment?"

I was unable to avoid a fawning response. "I will offer nothing less than what Fleury has already given," I said.

"Very good," said the President. "Jacques, let the Prime Minister know that Monsieur Roland Jolivet will be the new Special Presidential Envoy for Mediation of the Volga Crisis."

"Who knows?" the President whispered to me. "With success in a high profile matter, what's to stop you from being named a minister in the next government?"

I felt a touch of vertigo at the sudden prospect of an ascent to a ministerial post, until I realized this was one of Chavanne's motivational tricks. The President was famous for getting people to do things they didn't want to do.

The Volga Crisis was my problem now. With Jean-Do's military liaison still in the hospital, I was assigned Brigadier General Hubert Clauzon. I arranged to meet him at one of my favorite lunch spots, Les Trèfles. Clauzon, in a freshly pressed uniform, was waiting for me in the private dining room when I arrived. I shook his hand.

"You come highly recommended," I said.

"I hope I can be of service," Clauzon said.

"You certainly can. If I'm alive next year, I'll send you a thank-you note."

Clauzon smoothed his mustache. "Security for the upcoming trip will be at Level Five. I can go over the arrangements."

"Never mind." I waved him off. "That's your line of work. I'm sure I can't give you any pointers."

The sommelier entered with a bottle of 2009 Haut-Batailley I'd reserved. After I approved the wine, he filled each glass.

"My predecessor made very little progress before he was killed," I said. "I need a new angle, and you can help."

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"How so?" Clauzon took a sip of wine.

I waited for the wine steward to leave before I continued.

"The mind field. It's an exceptional discovery, and a coup for France."

"Indeed."

"So much of the work was done in Toulouse by Besson and his team. To prove that it actually exists, and to vindicate perhaps the greatest Frenchman of all, Descartes. I find that thrilling."

"Ah, but Descartes missed the most important fact." Clauzon set down his glass. "The mind and brain interact through the exchange of energy."

"But for one living at the time of Louis XIII, he was pretty nearly right."

"But what has this to do with the Volga crisis?"

I placed my elbows on the table and leaned forward. "I've heard — don't ask me from whom — that the funding of mind field research by the Ministry of Defense is not solely for the purpose of expanding human knowledge."

A young woman with a gorgeous bust and top security clearance had told me that, but Clauzon didn't need to know.

"If you think we have produced a breakthrough weapon, you are mistaken."

I shrugged my shoulders. "A weapon? No. I'd have no use for it. You make the war, Hubert. I bring the peace."

The waiter came in and took our order. After he departed, I said, "I've heard of a device that reproduces the mind field of all living beings within a given space. It can determine what a person is seeing or hearing, smelling, tasting or thinking. I understand one of the applications may be to help in interrogating prisoners."

"You are remarkably well-informed," Clauzon said.

"With these Eastern Europeans being the difficult lot they are, it occurs to me that I'd reach a settlement more easily if I knew where their bottom lines were."

Clauzon tilted his head back. "I see that would give you an advantage, but is it proper in the diplomatic field?"

I twirled the stem of my wine glass. "If I can avoid a bloody conflict between Russia and Tatarstan, who can say it's not proper?"

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Clauzon was a bit of a moralist. I found this curious in one who kills for a living. But he agreed to learn more about mind field technology and report back to me.

My great fear was that the thing came with a helmet or a bunch of electrodes. How could I persuade the President of Russia to put it on? What would I tell him — it's the latest men's fashion from Galeries Lafayette?

Clauzon got back to me within twenty-four hours. "The device is entirely non-invasive," he said. "The subject needn't even know of its existence."

"How big is it?" I asked. "Can it fit in a suitcase?"

"No. It takes up an entire room."

"Damn! If I can't bring it with me, it's not of much use."

I remained in Paris until the funeral. The President was there, along with the Premier and most of the cabinet. As I watched Jean-Do's coffin being lowered into the grave, I felt a knot in my stomach that was not just for his sake — I wondered if I might not be the next one placed in French soil.

Margherita Fleury looked lovely in a below-the-knee black dress. With my wife Isabelle at my side, I offered condolences. "I'm so sorry, Margherita. How are you holding up?"

Margherita squeezed my hand, then hugged me, her breasts pressing against my ribs. "Take care, Roland," Margherita said, her French colored with a light Italian accent. "We don't want to lose you, too." Margherita, sobbing, loosened her grip and turned to hug Isabelle.

Early the next morning, I flew off in a military jet for Tatarstan, together with General Clauzon and the rest of the delegation. The Tatars, the northernmost Muslim nation in the world, live at the same latitude as Denmark. As we descended into Kazan airport, eight hundred kilometers east of Moscow, I had a marvelous view of the Volga.

We were met at the airport by the Tatar foreign minister. He invited me to join him in an armored personnel carrier for the short trip to Kazan, the Tatar capital.

Along the way, the Tatar official recounted details of the attack which killed Jean-Do. A precision-guided missile struck Jean-Do's limousine as it neared a lakeside resort where talks were scheduled. "From the wreckage,

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we've identified the missile as a Chuikov-3," he said in Russian. "This proves Russian army involvement."

"You know as well as I do," I responded in Russian, "that those missiles could have come from the black market."

"Perhaps," the foreign minister conceded.

I met the Tatar President in his offices in the Kazan Kremlin. Ali Mustafayev, an international figure in the world of ballet, had been living in London for two decades when he was asked to return home to take the Tatar Presidency. Mustafayev had a slim build, with dark hair and vaguely Asiatic features that reminded me of Lenin.

"It's a great honor to meet you," I said in French. "I once saw you as Don Quixote at the Opera Bastille."

Mustafayev grinned. "It was a very special production for me. Rudolf Nureyev had been Artistic Director of the Paris Opera Ballet. Nureyev was my idol — he was a Tatar of Muslim heritage like me, not a Russian. To dance with what had once been his company was a dream fulfilled."

Mustafayev placed an arm on my shoulder. "Come, let me show you the grounds."

Surrounded by bodyguards, we toured the Kazan Kremlin. "The Russian 'Kremlin,'" he said, "comes from the Tatar word for 'fortress.' When Ivan the Terrible sacked the city in 1552, this Kremlin was our last stronghold. You see the tower there?"

"The one that looks a bit like a Chinese pagoda?"

"When Ivan approached, the last Queen of Kazan pitched herself off that tower."

How gruesome these Easterners are, I thought. Of course, we Western Europeans were hardly better. In the Paris of that era, the streets ran red with the blood of thousands of Protestants slain on Saint Bartholomew's Night.

"This is beautiful," I said, in front of a small mosque with a slender, soaring minaret carved from white stone. As I gazed up at the spire, I nearly expected Rapunzel to let down her long golden hair.

"This is the Azimov Mosque," Mustafayev said. "We're a Muslim nation, but not extreme. We are Europeans. The Bolshevik Revolution modernized us."

"At tremendous cost."

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"Indeed. Nowadays, I prefer the *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* of the French Revolution." Mustafayev gripped my upper arm tightly. "It took more than two hundred years for the freedom you won to reach this side of the European continent. We won't ever give it up again."

In France, I consider a devoted attachment to the French Revolution to be rather *passé.* Too many guillotines. But Mustafayev nearly had me choked up. I reminded myself not to let sentiment interfere with the affairs of state.

The rest of the afternoon passed without incident, and I spent a night at the Kazan Hilton amid tight security. I eased the housekeeping staff's workload by sharing a bed with Marie-Therese, the delegation's protocol officer.

The next morning, I flew to Sheremetevo Airport in Moscow. An armored limousine picked me up and delivered me to the "other" Kremlin. I met with the Russian leader, Vassily Kovansky, at a luncheon inside the presidential palace. The sumptuous spread included sturgeon and caviar, beef, lamb, and a variety of noodles and potato dishes.

"Don't underestimate us, my friend," President Kovansky said. The heavy-jowled Kovansky's blond hair was streaked with gray. He spoke in an earthy Russian that I struggled with at times. "Napoleon once occupied this very Kremlin in which we enjoy this wonderful meal. We did not surrender; we burned Moscow and retreated deeper into our heartland. Less than three years later, our troops were in Paris."

I wiped my lips with a yellow cloth napkin. "I know it's difficult to accept a Tatar state within the Russian heartland. But *you* revoked the treaty recognizing Tatar autonomy within the Federation. You provoked them into declaring independence."

"No, *you* don't understand, my friend," Kovansky said. "The Tatars have been a menace throughout Russian history. They wiped out whole cities. Their leader Batu was the grandson of Genghis Khan. For two hundred years, Russia was under the Tatar yoke, until finally Tsar Ivan destroyed it."

Kovansky snatched a leg of lamb off a serving plate, and bit into it with evident satisfaction. "Tsar Ivan in the West is called 'terrible.'" Kovansky pronounced the word as in the English language. "But the Russian, *grozny*, really means 'awesome.' He was Ivan the Awesome."

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"The Tatars you fear are long gone," I said.

"There you are wrong. The symbol of our country is the bear. The bear hibernates. They are hibernating too, waiting to wake up, to turn on Russia again."

Genghis Khan and hibernating bears! I pursed my lips to avoid snickering.

"You're telling me you are afraid of Mustafayev?"

Kovansky laughed. "Ballet Man? Of course not. He's a front. But there are people behind him." Kovansky glared at me. "No, a Muslim state on the Volga is unthinkable. The river, we call it *Matuschka Volga*, Mother Volga. You think I'm going to let some Tatar to have his way with my mother?"

I flew back discouraged. A week later, I was at my Quai d'Orsay office when I received more alarming news. I had General Clauzon up on a big wall-mounted video screen which normally lies hidden behind Second Empire-style drapery.

"The Russian army has announced upcoming exercises involving two armored divisions in the Pavlovo region," Clauzon said. "That's near Nizhny Novgorod, about three hundred kilometers west of Kazan. I'd say Kovansky wants to intimidate the Tatars."

"Any chance of an actual invasion?" I asked.

"The landscape is flat with no natural obstacles. If they can cross the Volga, there's not much to stop them from driving straight to Kazan."

I glanced out my window at the golden horses of the Alexander III bridge over the Seine. The last Russian Tsar, Nicholas II, laid the cornerstone to the bridge and named it after his father. In 1918, Nicholas was shot to death in a cellar in Ekaterinburg, a few hundred kilometers east of Kazan, in Siberia.

"Right now, Hubert, I wish I could sneak a peek at Kovansky's mind field. I might prevent a fatal misunderstanding if I could predict his next move."

Clauzon arched an eyebrow.

"You see, Mustafayev hopes Kovansky is bluffing. As long as there's that hope, Mustafayev won't give up the dream of independence. If Kovansky intends to invade, and we can prove this — well, I believe Mustafayev will back down rather than have his people butchered by the Russians."

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"The Ministry is not prepared," Clauzon said, "to reveal technical methods to a foreign leader."

"So we mask the origin — we say we have a source inside Kovansky's circle."

"Okay," Clauzon said. "If you get Kovansky onto French soil, we can open him up and look inside."

The President of the Republic extended a hastily arranged invitation to Kovansky for a state visit. Three weeks remained until the Russian military exercises. I arranged for the deployment of Clauzon's gadget through Roux-Levy, the President's Special Counselor, who said, "The President, while entirely unaware of its use, is fully supportive of your effort."

I greeted the Russian President upon his arrival at Charles de Gaulle airport. The limousine delivered us to the courtyard of the Elysée Palace. The President of the Republic greeted Kovansky in the marble entrance hall. After friendly remarks conveyed through a translator, President Chavanne said, "I must rejoin the National Federation of Agriculture meeting in my office. If not, the farmers will drive their tractors onto highways, and block all routes entering Paris."

The Russian president nodded. "I've had headaches like that too."

"Genevieve will show you about the palace," President Chavanne said. "I will rejoin you at 14:00 in the Salon Pompadour."

Genevieve Allegre was a young presidential aide with a fine derrière, succulent legs, and, while her bosom resembled the salt flats of the Rhone delta more than the uplands of the Massif Central, she compensated for it with an adorable little nose and scintillating hazel eyes.

I momentarily forgot the business at hand as Genevieve led us on a tour of the formal rooms of the Elysée. Kovansky and I were finally able to settle down in armchairs in the Salon Pompadour at 13:30. I had in fact carefully arranged with Roux-Levy for time alone with Kovansky. Clauzon's device was literally under our feet, filling a private area one floor below. The device would be shut off at 14:00, when the President of the Republic entered the room. "His secrets must remain his own," Roux-Levy had said.

I tried to get Kovansky to focus his thoughts on the Volga crisis. Unfortunately, his mind was elsewhere.

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"Genevieve is a beautiful woman," Kovansky said. "French women are very stylish, how do you say, *chic*?"

"There are many beautiful women among the Russians," I said.

"But not so *chic*, right?"

"Paris is the capital of style."

"Russian women look best with their clothes off. With clothes off, there is no *chic*. Am I right?"

I nodded. "It's what they're born with that's essential. But perhaps we could talk about the Tatars?"

He furrowed his brow. "The Tatar women, I don't care for. But, they say that some of the most beautiful Russian women have Tatar blood." He tapped a finger on the left side of his face. "The high cheekbones."

"Doesn't that suggest a need for peaceful relations between your two peoples?"

"No. It suggests that Russians must be on top."

Kovansky laughed at his little joke. He proceeded to lecture me on the merits of the female population of the various nations of the world. Kovansky had a special fondness for Afghan women, which he developed while serving with Russian forces occupying Afghanistan. He seemed to especially like it when they were unwilling. I found him repellent.

It went on like this until the doors opened and President Chavanne entered the room. My only hope, I told myself bitterly, was that while talking about women, Kovansky was really thinking about the Volga crisis.

It was forty-eight hours before the results of Kovansky's mind field scan were available. I drove out to a research facility southwest of Paris in Châtillon, and met Clauzon in the lobby. We passed through a metal detector, stepped down a bare corridor, and entered a soundproof conference room. After we closed the door and sat down, Clauzon cocked his head back and said, "You and Jean-Dominique Fleury's widow? Do you think that's wise?"

I stared at him in amazement. "Jean-Dominique had his liaisons. It's only fair that Margherita had her own to enjoy."

"It's not of recent vintage?"

"No. No. To start something so soon after his death would not be right," I said. "No. It's of long standing."

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Clauzon twisted his wedding ring. "That is better, I suppose."

I sighed. "I wondered whether your machine would catch me."

"Don't worry," Clauzon said. "Compared to Kovansky, you're Saint Louis."

Not compared to Hubert Clauzon though, I thought. His manner irked me. I needed him, though, so I let the remark pass. "What did you find out about Kovansky?" I asked.

"Russian special forces plan to assassinate several Tatar leaders, with the aim of provoking revenge attacks upon the Russian minority in Tatarstan. This will give Kovansky the pretext of turning the forthcoming exercises into an invasion."

"Then we're dealing with the worst case scenario," I said.

Clauzon stood up and paced around the room.

"Kovansky dreams of being a leader on a par with Ivan the Terrible. And he doesn't have a high opinion of you, by the way."

I sat up. "What does he think of me?"

Clauzon grinned. "He thinks of you mostly as a French poodle, but sometimes as a wooden puppet with a baguette up your rear."

"Well, I don't like Monsieur Kovansky either." I kicked my chair. "But what can I do? I have to persuade the Tatars to back down, for their own good."

"There's something else about Monsieur Kovansky."

"What?"

"I'd rather show you."

I followed Clauzon down a number of corridors, through several security checks, until we reached an underground room full of electronic equipment. Clauzon introduced me to a slight, dark-haired man in civilian dress. "Dr. Agnelli is the brain behind this project."

We shook hands. "It's a pleasure to cooperate with the Foreign Ministry," Dr. Agnelli said. "Let's take seats in the screening room. I've created a visual representation of the data."

"You can have a virtual reality experience of Kovansky's mind field," Clauzon said, "but I'm sure you'll find the video unsettling enough."

"Hubert, did Kovansky order Fleury's assassination?" I asked.

"He had foreknowledge," Clauzon said.

I felt my chest tighten. "Does he plan to kill me?"

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Clauzon shrugged. "It didn't cross his mind during the time we monitored him."

Not an entirely reassuring answer, I thought. We took seats in a small amphitheater.

"Mind is inherent in all matter," Agnelli said. "A mountain has more matter than a human being and therefore more mind, in a purely quantitative sense. But its mind field is incoherent and thus incapable of conscious thought."

As I will be if Kovansky has me killed, I thought.

"In the mammalian brain," he continued, "cyclical electrical flows in the thalamus induce a mind field that is coherent, and therefore conscious."

Conversation ceased as the lights dimmed. An image flashed onto the screen. I recognized Genevieve Allegre of the Elysée Palace staff. This was followed by one of another young woman, and then by Genevieve again. This time she was nude. I told myself this wasn't the real Genevieve, only Kovansky's fantasy, Genevieve's head with the torso of another woman. Still, I felt aroused.

The succeeding image was of a young woman, one with lighter hair than Genevieve. She looked sexy in a red cocktail dress. Her complexion was fresh, brand new, as if she'd just been taken out of the wrapper. She seemed to be a teenager trying to appear grown-up.

"It gets worse," Clauzon said.

It's not bad so far, I thought.

The image changed subtly. The nude girl was now set against a dark background, her body twisted at an odd angle. Then the girl's image faded, and we were left with one of a spade shoved into the ground next to an open pit.

I felt my stomach turn. "Is this a memory or a fantasy?" I asked.

The gruesome image on the screen was replaced by one of a brandy glass.

"Bring back that shot of the grave," Clauzon said.

The image returned to the screen.

"Do you see the faint line ten degrees below the moon?" Clauzon asked.

"Yes."

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"On the hunch that it was a ridge line, I had our mapping unit compare its shape to terrain contours taken from satellite images."

"And?"

Clauzon smiled. "Overlay the ridge."

The image of a mountain range unfamiliar to me was placed on the screen. It fit perfectly against the jagged line from Kovansky's mind field.

"Sochi," Clauzon said.

"The Black Sea resort?"

"The ridge is a section of the North Caucasus above Sochi. Kovansky has owned a series of dachas in the Sochi region, moving from one to another more luxurious as his influence expanded."

"You've outdone yourself, Hubert," I shook my head in amazement.

"Thanks to Dr. Agnelli," Clauzon said, nodding in his direction.

"Is there any way we could verify this on the ground?" I asked.

"Yes, but that would require special authorization."

"I can get that for you," I said.

With blessings from on-high, a special intelligence unit was dispatched to the Caucasus. Meanwhile, a bomb placed in a trash can exploded in central Kazan, killing one and injuring thirty-four. Speaking on a secure line with the Tatar President, I said I suspected Russian involvement in the attack, but asked him not to retaliate. "It would jeopardize new developments," I said, "about which I must be necessarily vague."

When I finally got the word from Clauzon, I rushed over to his ministry. On his desk was a thighbone, encased in clear plastic.

"From the backyard of a dacha owned by Monsieur Kovansky until seven years ago," Clauzon said. "We made a video of the entire exhumation."

"Ugh! This guy really is in the tradition of Stalin and Ivan."

"We've identified the victim. Her name was Olga Shelepin."

"Any relation to Major General Yuri Shelepin?"

"His daughter."

"My God, are you sure?"

"The Russians have a data bank which records DNA samples for all their military personnel for identification in case of death. Unofficially, we have access to that."

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I glanced out the window at a young *gendarme* on duty with a submachine gun. "The girl hardly seemed old enough for military service."

"She was fifteen when she disappeared. But her father was and is in the military. He and Kovansky were helicopter gunship pilots in Afghanistan. They were closely associated for many years afterward."

"You've been able to tie this sample to her father's DNA?"

"Within a probability of one in ten thousand million."

"Shelepin is a mean bastard, I hear. Do you think he might know about Kovansky's role?"

"His daughter's room has been left untouched since she disappeared." Clauzon handed me a reprint of an article from a Smolensk newspaper. "As to what Shelepin would do to his daughter's murderer, I wouldn't want to be that man."

I traveled to Moscow ten days before the military exercises were to take place. During his meeting with President Chavanne at the Elysée, Kovansky had agreed to further talks. Back on his home turf in the Kremlin, however, he was if anything less flexible.

I sighed. "I suppose my mission will be judged a failure in Paris. At least I have the holidays on the *Côte d'Azur* to look forward to."

"I hear it's delightful." Kovansky was pleased to change the topic.

"My family spends much of the summer in Antibes. I try to join them for three weeks in August. I understand you like to spend time at the seashore, too. Sochi, right?"

"You've been well-briefed," Kovansky said.

Casually reaching into my briefcase for a pen, I said, "Your friend Major General Shelepin has a dacha there as well."

"He used to. He doesn't go to Sochi anymore."

"His daughter disappeared there, didn't she? That would account for it. It would bring back bad memories."

"Yes," Kovansky said in an unruffled tone.

"They never heard from her again?"

"Not to my knowledge," Kovansky said. "Perhaps she was kidnapped by a Tatar."

He was repellent as ever, I thought. "If she was kidnapped and even murdered, it would be more reasonable to assume it was done by someone known to her, perhaps a trusted family friend like yourself."

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"Your joke is not amusing," Kovansky said in a near-whisper.

"Perhaps she lies even now covered by a meter or two of earth in the backyard of some dacha in Sochi."

"Our meeting is finished." Kovansky rose to his feet.

"We all have our little secrets, things we wouldn't want others, even our closest friends, to know about." I closed my briefcase.

Kovansky stepped toward me. "Say what you mean."

"In France, we have a secret service known as the DGSE," I said. "It's their job to know your secrets."

I thought I observed a moment of hesitation in Kovansky's eyes.

"The DGSE? Didn't they blow up the ship of those stupid environmentalists — "

"Greenpeace," I said.

"Who were trying to stop French nuclear testing in the South Pacific."

"It was not their best moment, I grant you."

"On the contrary, that's when I began to respect the French."

I smiled involuntarily. "The best secret service, in my opinion, is the one you never hear about. The one that can keep a secret."

"That's true."

"Ours can keep a secret, your secret, if sufficiently motivated."

"For instance...."

"If you would recognize Tatarstan as an independent state and pledge not to take any aggressive action against it."

Kovansky lunged at me, grabbed my briefcase and swung it at me. I stepped out of the way.

"You think you have me, don't you? Well, you're mistaken, and if you don't leave here soon, I'm not responsible for what might happen to you."

"Are you threatening to do to me what you did to Jean-Dominique Fleury?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

I snatched my briefcase from his hands. "Yes, you do. You do indeed."

I left immediately for Sheremetevo Airport. While awaiting clearance to take off, however, my jet was asked to return to the gate. I was met by a courier bearing a message from Kovansky, requesting that I return to the Kremlin one last time.

Had he changed his mind? I doubted it. Perhaps on the way back my

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car would be involved in a fatal "accident." Would he really risk killing me in Moscow, where his fingerprints would be so apparent?

I decided to chance it. I made it to the Kremlin safely, but to my dismay, I was not brought in to see Kovansky. Instead, I was handed a padded envelope and shunted into a small room with electronic equipment.

The envelope contained a video disk. I popped the disk into a video player mounted on the wall. At first I thought it was one of Kovansky's twisted jokes — a pornographic video of a couple in the thralls of passion. But when I saw the man's face, I realized that the man was *me*. I stared in astonishment as my night in the Swissotel Moscow with Marie-Therese from the Protocol Section was replayed before my eyes, this time from the vantage point of the ceiling. I could even see a rather large mole on my back, of which I'd not been previously aware.

This was Kovansky's attempt to balance the scales. A *quid pro quo*. I protect his secret, he protects mine. I pulled the video disk out of the player and slipped it into my briefcase. Then I broke out into audible laughter.

He actually thought he could blackmail me with a sex video. I wished Jean-Do were alive. He'd have gotten a kick out of it. Kovansky had spent too much time in the backward parts of Europe. If this were to become known back in Paris I might get a slap on the wrist, but more likely a pat on the back.

Upon leaving the room, I was met by one of Kovansky's aides, Dmitri Ogarev, who asked me to return with him to his office. After we sat down, Ogarev asked, "What do you think about what you've just seen?"

"Do you have any more copies?" I asked. "I'd like to send some to my friends."

Ogarev shrugged. "I take it you do not care whether this becomes public or not?"

"It will only enhance my reputation."

He stood up suddenly. "Pffh! I told him it wouldn't work. A man like you requires something different. That's why I'm authorized to offer you four point two million euros to be deposited in a Swiss bank account."

"Is this another joke?"

"No joke," Ogarev said. "Do you want the money?"

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"There are a lot of things I could do with four million euros."

"Four point two," he said. "Look, we have a general idea of your net worth, and we're prepared to augment it substantially."

He was serious.

"I'm curious," I said. "Have you paid off any other French political figures?"

"You don't want to know." Ogarev glanced at a painting of a winter scene hanging on the wall. "If I told you who I've paid off, I'd have to tell the next one that I'd paid off Roland Jolivet."

"What would you expect from me in return for your generous gift?" I wondered what was the likelihood of reaching Paris alive if I turned down the offer. If, on the other hand, I took the money, I'd only be doing what many politicians regularly do.

"Merely to stay neutral in the conflict between Russia and Tatarstan. To take a hands-off approach, and certainly to make sure that any information that would reflect poorly upon Russia or its President not be disclosed."

"I see. And a hands-off approach, I take it, would imply that Russia and Tatarstan might not reach a peaceful settlement of their outstanding issues?"

"The money will be provided in three installments," Ogarev said. "One million up front. One million euros in three months. The final 2.2 million in nine months, should everything go as promised."

"When do you need an answer?"

"At once."

I reflected briefly. "Make it five million," I said.

"Done," said Ogarev.

I don't believe I'd have made it back to my plane if I hadn't agreed to take the money; I'd dickered over the price in order to win his confidence. Once I was airborne, I placed a call to the Foreign Minister and informed him of the bribe. He agreed that we would play along with it for the time being, while Clauzon pursued a back channel to General Shelepin. A few days later, when an attaché from the Russian embassy passed me a sealed envelope with the number of the Swiss bank account, I passed it on to the Ministry of Finance.

On the eve of the Russian military exercises threatening Kazan,

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Kovansky flew out to be with his troops. His Brusilov-330 never made it to the staging area in Pavlovo. Residents of Tumbotino reported hearing a large explosion; wreckage was located three kilometers south of town. In the immediate aftermath, the military exercises were canceled.

Initial press reports suggested that "Tatar terrorists" were responsible. But a board of inquiry determined that Kovansky himself was at the controls when the plane got into trouble. Kovansky, a qualified pilot, was known to have taken the controls on previous flights. This time, however, he reportedly made an approach despite localized thunderstorms and fell short of the runway. The findings were widely accepted. After all, the chair of the board of inquiry was someone perceived to be close to Kovansky — Major General Yuri Shelepin.

Enough time has passed and enough of the major players have passed on, that I may now reveal General Shelepin's own role in the affair. Shelepin's own suspicions about Kovansky's role in his daughter's disappearance were awakened by our agents. He proved quite eager to cooperate. Kovansky's Brusilov-330 took off with a faulty navigational system. It would have crashed no matter who was piloting the plane.

After Kovansky's death, I was able to broker a deal between the new President of Russia and the President of Tatarstan. The old treaty that Kovansky had renounced was revived, with amendments related to mineral rights and the rights of ethnic minorities. Neither side was fully satisfied by the outcome, but that's what negotiation is about.

The bribe was returned to the Russian treasury. Sometimes, when I glance about our apartment on the Boulevard Raspail with its faded elegance, I wonder what five million euros might have done for its appearance. Still, I have few regrets. I've had the undeserved support of a very tolerant wife. I've enjoyed the career that Jean-Dominique Fleury might have had, had he lived. I think he'd be satisfied with what I've made of it, if his mind field somehow persists in some other realm or cosmic sphere.

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SCIENCE

PAUL DOHERTY & PAT MURPHY

DEATH RAYS AND OTHER EXPERIMENTS TO TRY AT HOME

SCIENCE fiction writers began writing about lasers years before they actually existed. Okay, so we called them blasters or ray guns or death rays. But we had the basic idea down: a device that delivered an amazing burst of energy in the form of light.

Theodore Maiman at Hughes Aircraft Company made the first real laser in 1960. Since that time, lasers have become much smaller and cheaper. Today, you can buy a solid-state laser pointer at a supermarket checkout for less than $10.

Despite the advances in laser technology, this method of delivering energy with light hasn't yielded a death ray weapon just yet. Instead, lasers have proven useful for communication and measurement, for cutting cloth and steel, for serving as scalpels in delicate surgery, and, of course, for making bright red dots on a screen during lectures. The U.S. military has spent tens of billions of dollars researching laser weapons and has succeeded in knocking down a few missiles using lasers. There are also laser-guided bombs and missiles, but so far the military uses of lasers run a far distant second to other uses.

In this column, we'll tell you a little about lasers and their uses, we'll provide some interesting experiments you can do with a laser pointer, and we'll tell you how you could, with existing technology, create a death ray. (Trust us: we really will!)

START WITH A NEON LIGHT

Send an arc of electricity through neon gas, and the gas glows. Stop there, and you've got a neon light. (One look at Las Vegas reveals how offensive a neon light can be, but it's not a weapon — unless you count the power of capitalism as a weapon).

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Here's what's happening in the neon light. The electric current flowing through the neon gas is made of electrons, which are moving at a fair clip. Those high-speed electrons crash into neon atoms and the atoms absorb energy. Then the atoms give up that energy and emit light.

But the atoms don't just absorb and emit random amounts of energy. The electrons in an atom occupy various discrete energy levels. When an electron crashes into an atom, the energy that the atom absorbs boosts an electron up to a higher energy level. When the electron drops down to a lower energy level, it gives off a particle known as a photon — a particle of light. This photon has an energy equal to the energy difference between the high and low energy states, producing red light.

Before we go on, we'd better say a word about photons. We've talked before about the dual nature of light — it's both a particle and a wave. Photons are particles because they are created entirely or not at all and they disappear the same way. They are waves because they travel with a wavelength and a frequency.

They Do It with Mirrors

To make a neon light into a laser beam, you need to produce a bunch of photons that are all traveling in the same direction, with the same frequency or color, the same polarization, and the same phase. The wave crests of one photon have to be side by side with the wave crests of all the others.

How do you manage that? Well, Einstein came up with the operating principle behind the laser. He knew that an atom in an excited state decays into a lower energy state by emitting a photon. Einstein figured out what would happen if you hit an atom in an excited state with a photon that had exactly the same energy and frequency as the one the atom was going to emit. You would stimulate the atom to emit that photon. This is called stimulated emission, and it's the key to creating a laser.

Einstein also figured out that the newly emitted photon would be the identical twin of the stimulating photon. It would be going in the same direction with the same phase. So to make a laser, you stimulate atoms to emit photons, then keep all those photons going in the same direction with the same phase. When you have a beam with a few billion billion identical photons, you focus the beam on a tiny spot and deliver all of the energy in the photons to that spot. Presto! It's a laser.

The first laser was a pulsed solid-state laser made from a ruby

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rod with mirrors on both ends. A flash lamp shone through the sides of the rod, soaking the atoms in light energy. The atoms absorbed the light and became excited. The atoms in the ruby decayed, emitting photons in random directions. Once a random photon started bouncing back and forth between the mirrors, it triggered other atoms to discharge. Photons would bounce back and forth between the parallel mirrors on the ends of the laser, triggering all of the excited atoms in the rod to release their energy into the laser beam. It takes several back-and-forth bounces of the photons to deplete all of the excited atoms of their energy but even so, the atoms are quickly drained of their energy, resulting in a very short pulse of bright laser light.

To the Moon and Back

Pulsed solid-state lasers similar to the first one have done great things. One very cool project has used laser light to measure the distance to the Moon to one centimeter accuracy.

To measure the distance to the Moon, scientists bounced light off a reflector left behind by the Apollo 11 astronauts. The laser beams are projected from pulsed neodymium YAG (yttrium aluminum garnet) lasers at the McDonald observatory in Texas. Only a laser beam will stay together long enough to reach the Moon and return with enough energy to be detected.

The laser sends out 10^{17} photons in a pulse through its 0.8 meter diameter telescope. By the time it reaches the Moon, the beam has spread to 4 kilometers in diameter. Of those 10^{17} photons, a mere billion photons hit the 0.4 meter square retroreflector and bounce back toward the Earth. By the time this light arrives back at the telescope of the McDonald observatory (just three seconds after its departure), there is only one photon left from the original batch.

The round trip travel time of this photon gives the precise distance from the telescope to the retroreflector and back again. Decades of these measurements have given scientists a much better understanding of the orbit of the Moon. For example, they know that the Moon's orbit is moving away from the Earth at an average of 3.8 cm per year. The distance to the Moon changes in a way that shows that the Moon has a liquid core. ("Crunchy on the outside; chewy on the inside," says Paul.)

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A Couple of Mirrors and Something Excitable

Most lasers, like the solid-state pulse laser, have a mirror on each end and bounce light back and forth. The material sandwiched between the mirrors determines the type of laser. In the original laser, the material was a ruby rod.

Soon after the invention of the solid-state laser, Ali Javan at MIT managed to coax a gas into emitting laser light. In the classic gas laser, a mixture of helium-neon gas is excited by an electrical discharge, like a neon light.

In gas lasers, the mirror at one end of the tube is made as perfect as possible. The other is designed to allow two percent of the light to leak through. That means that the gas laser can emit a continuous beam of light, rather than a short pulse. It also means that the laser light inside a gas laser is fifty times brighter than the beam that leaks out of the laser.

Carbon dioxide gas lasers (emitting invisible infrared light) create beams with hundreds of watts of power focused into a small pencil of light. These are the lasers that have been used to cut out cloth, slicing through many pieces of cloth at the same time to make pieces that are exactly the same size. They've also been used to cut steel.

The military developed their first "death rays" using gas lasers. These experiments culminated with an air force jet shooting down a few antiaircraft missiles using a gas laser. The details of this experiment show why laser weapons haven't arrived quite yet. The gas laser filled the belly of an entire, huge C-135, a four jet engine transport plane. The experiment showed that you could actually shoot down an antiaircraft missile, but it also proved that the laser you needed to do this was too big to be useful on the battlefield.

LED Lasers

The hope for future laser weapons can be seen in the ten dollar laser pointer you can buy at your grocery store check-out line. This is the laser diode based on light emitting diode (LED) technology.

In the LED laser, a semiconductor is excited by an electric current passing through the diode. You can think of the semiconductor in an LED laser as a giant manmade atom, designed to absorb energy and release photons. Instead of the many energy levels that an atom has, the semiconductor laser has just two levels called "bands" — the higher energy conduction band and the

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lower-energy valence band. Rather than boosting atoms to higher energy levels, the electrons flowing through a diode can drop into what physicists call "holes," gaps suited to receiving electrons. When an electron falls into a hole, a photon rushes away with the energy. (This is how a light emitting diode, LED, works.) But a passing photon can stimulate an electron to drop into a hole and emit a photon. Sound familiar? Once again, we have stimulated emission — which turns the LED into a laser.

The mirrors at either end of a semiconductor laser can be terrible — it doesn't take much reflection to make this laser work. The electric current through the laser delivers energy so fast it can keep up with the light leaking out the ends. The mirror at the output end of the LED laser is just the flat face of the semiconductor crystal. When light inside a ten dollar laser pointer hits this face, seventy percent of it is reflected. The remaining thirty percent blasts out to make the spot on the slide screen.

Those supermarket laser pointers are amazing. With just three small batteries, they produce a bright beam for a long time. This beam is created by exciting the atoms in a solid, and solids are about a thousand times denser than gases. So, there are many more atoms per unit volume to soak up the excitation energy. A death ray based on a solid-state laser can be a thousand times smaller volume than one using a gas.

If you read the side of a laser pointer, you'll find that it produces a beam with about a milliwatt of power — not much power at all. That power is concentrated in a narrow beam. Look at the size of the beam as it hits a nearby piece of paper — the spot of light is about a millimeter wide and a millimeter high.

The damage done by light depends on its intensity — that is, its power per unit area. Even a milliwatt can have a high intensity if it is focused on a small enough area. Because we know the power of the beam and the area of the beam, we can easily calculate the power per unit area in the beam: 1 milliwatt divided by 1 millimeter times 1 millimeter = 1000 Watts per meter squared.

This number is very close to "the solar constant," the intensity of sunlight at the surface of the Earth. If you shine your laser on a sunlit white wall, you'll see that the laser spot vanishes in the sunlight, demonstrating that it is less intense than the sun. The laser light shining on your skin is no more

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intense than sunlight on your skin — but that doesn't mean it can't be dangerous.

Your eye can focus both the laser beam or light from the sun to a tiny spot on your retina. The beam is focused to a spot 10^{-4}m across. So the intensity becomes a whopping 100 kilowatts per meter squared. Just as looking directly at the sun can burn your retina (which is why you should never do it), shining the milliwatt beam of a ten dollar laser in your eye theoretically could burn your retina. (Paul says that your blink reflex is fast enough to save you from any damage from the laser pointer, but it's an experiment we recommend against under any circumstances.)

Now about that Death Ray

To qualify as a death ray, we figure a laser needs to do something dramatic — like destroy a missile. To destroy a missile, you're probably going to need 10 kilowatts or so concentrated on a small spot. Now here's what you've been waiting for. We're going to tell you how to do it.

Simple. Just find ten million friends who all have 1 milliwatt supermarket lasers. Now convince them all to shine their lasers on exactly the same spot — somewhere on the missile you want to destroy.

There you go — 10 kilowatts all on the same spot. Death ray — sure enough!

You say you don't have ten million friends with lasers? Well, you could find one million friends who have ten lasers each. Or ten friends with a million lasers each.

Hey, we said it was simple. We didn't say it would be easy.

If you want to experiment with lasers but don't have 10 million of them, we suggest the easier experiments below.

EXPERIMENTS TO TRY AT HOME

Red Jell-O

Jell-O has been one of Pat's favorite scientific materials — ever since she figured out how to make lenses from it by molding lemon Jell-O in measuring spoons and plopping them out on clear deli lids. Red Jell-O is one of the best materials for laser experimentation. We make it at extra-strength, using 1/4 of the water called for in the

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recipe. The red laser beam scatters wonderfully from the red gelatin (It also scatters from clear or lemon or other flavors, but red is really the best.)

You can use the Jell-O to trace the path of the laser beam. Shine the beam into a blob of Jell-O, watch it bend and reflect inside the Jell-O. Make Jell-O lenses and see how they change the path of a beam of laser light. And when you are done with your experiments, you can snack on the Jell-O. It's dessert and it's a science experiment — two treats in one!

Fun with Mirrors

If you have a small, square mirror, you can do some of Paul's favorite laser experiments.

Put some white paper down on a tabletop and prop up the mirror so it stands vertically over the paper. Make a dot of laser light on the paper in front of the mirror. Move the spot of light toward the mirror in a straight line. When the dot hits the mirror, keep moving the laser, and the dot will seem to bounce off and travel back out along the white paper.

This is a great way to study reflection. Bring the dot straight into the mirror and it bounces straight back. Bring it into the mirror at an angle and it bounces off at the same angle. (A physicist would say: the angle of incidence equals the angle of reflection.) It's as if you are in control of the speed of light: bring the dot in slowly and it bounces off slowly, sweep it in quickly and you'll see a line of light bounce off the mirror.

If you have another mirror, you can study what happens in the laser itself. Put the mirrors face to face about a fist width apart. Shine the laser over the top of the mirrors onto the paper below. Move the spot of light toward one of the mirrors, notice that the spot bounces off the first mirror, then hits the second and bounces off it, then back off the first. Back and forth. That's what's going on inside the laser.

You can also use the mirrors to make an infinity box. Just look over the top of the two mirrors standing face to face and stick a finger in from the side. Notice the array of finger images running off to infinity.

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Check out the details. Each finger image faces opposite the direction of its neighbor images, fingerprints alternating with fingernails. How many reflected fingers can you see? Some light is lost on each bounce so the images get dimmer and dimmer after multiple reflections. If you wear glasses take them off, and you may notice that you see fewer images. Tilt one or both mirrors away from perfect parallelness. Notice how the images sweep off in curves.

Welcome to infinity.

Laser Kaleidoscope

Face the two mirrors toward each other and then bring two mirror edges together. This makes the mirrors into an open book. You can use the laser to study how light bounces off the mirrors. Make a dot of light on the paper and move the dot toward one of the mirrors. Notice how the light bounces off one mirror, then the other and eventually comes back out from between the two mirrors. Change the angle between the two mirrors until it is 90 degrees, a right angle. When the laser bounces off both mirrors it comes out along a path parallel to the ingoing path. The arrangement is a retroreflector (like the one Apollo astronauts left on the Moon).

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Stephen Gallagher's name will surely be familiar to longtime readers, thanks to such stories as "The Boy Who Talked to Animals," "Vodyanoi," and "Like Clockwork." In recent years, he hasn't written many short stories, focusing instead on novels (such as Red, Red Robin *and* Nightmare, with Angel*), screenwriting (an adaptation of* The Boat House*), and directing (an ITV miniseries of* Oktober.*) His current work includes two new novels,* The Painted Bride *and* The Spirit Box.

My Repeater

By Stephen Gallagher

WHAT CAN I SAY? IT WAS A job, and I was glad to get it. The money wasn't great, but I had no skills and nothing to offer beyond a vague feeling that I was meant for something better. My mother knew someone who knew the owner, and I got a message to go along and show myself. I started two days later. Training was minimal. Customers were few in number.

I'd been there six weeks when I saw my first returnee.

He must have got off the bus at the far end of town, and it had started to rain on him as he'd been walking through the center. I saw him coming up the road. The road was called Technology Drive, and it had been built to run north out of town and into the hills. Ours was the only building on it. You walked about two hundred yards to get to us, with open scrub on either side. If you wanted to follow the road further you could, but there was nothing much to look at unless you wanted to see how the weeds had broken up the concrete.

He walked with his head down, and with his hands in the pockets of

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his brown overcoat. The rain was light but he walked as if he was taking a beating.

He looked vaguely familiar. But at that point I hadn't considered the possibility that any of the people I'd been dealing with might ever come back.

He came in and went straight to the ledge under the window where we kept the boxes of forms. He didn't have to ask for any help. When he brought the paperwork over to the counter, the boxes had been filled in and the waivers were all in order and I'd little more to do than run through the questionnaire and then take it all through to my boss for his approval.

Morley was in his little back office, where he spent most of the days reading old magazines. He had a desk, a chair, and an anglepoise lamp that couldn't hold a pose without slowly collapsing. I think he had a framed picture on the wall but I can't for the life of me remember what it was of.

"Customer, boss," I told him, and showed him the papers.

He looked them over, and then tilted his chair back a couple of extra degrees so that he could see through the doorway to the main part of the shop. He stared at the waiting man for a moment, then gave me a nod and returned his attention to his reading. Most of his magazines were old technical publications, filled with page after page of fine print. They carried long lists of obsolete gear and they looked about as much fun as telephone directories.

I went back to the counter, and worked out the charges on the spreadsheet. The further back in time you wanted to go, the more it cost. Then there were other complicating factors, like body weight and geography.

When we'd sorted out the payment, I gave him a keycard to put in the machine.

"Booth five," I told him.

He went inside and closed the door. I made all the settings and locked off the switches, and then there was nothing else to do but press the big red button.

"Are you ready, sir?" I called out to him.

"Get on with it," I heard him say.

So I got on with it. It was no thrill, just a routine — any buzz had gone out of it very quickly. But something jolted me in that moment as I

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realized why he'd seemed just a little bit familiar. It was the target settings that I recognized. I'd set them before. He'd been in about twelve days previously and he'd specified exactly the same destination.

But he'd been at least ten years older then.

IT WAS A NOTHING job in a run-down travel bureau in a town in the middle of nowhere. I could have been stacking shelves in a supermarket or earning merit stars in a fast-food franchise, but instead I was sending a small group of losers back in time to relive their mistakes. I know that's what they did, because the same bunch of people brought us so much in the way of repeat business.

There must have been hundreds of bureaux like ours, small-town operations all scraping by as the last of their investors' capital dwindled. They'd been set up as a franchise network when the technology had first become available. They were like those long-distance phone places where you buy time at a counter and they assign you a booth while they set up the call; only here, you paid your money to be sent back to a date and a place of your choice.

Anyone could walk in and do it.

But only a strange few ever did.

The predicted boom had been a bust. I suppose it was like space travel. Full of romance and possibilities until it became achievable, and a matter of doubtful value ever after.

Here's what I learned when I talked it over with Morley:

He laid his magazine facedown on the desk and said, "I bet there's something in your life that you'd change, if you could."

"That's got to be true of everybody," I said. "Hasn't it?"

"So why don't you consider going back?"

I suppose the correct answer was that it would be a huge and scary one-way trip, and to make it would involve abandoning the life I now had. And for what? No certain outcome.

But what I said was, "You don't pay me enough."

"I'm not talking about the cost of it," Morley said. "Say I offered you a free one. Would you consider it then?"

"That would depend if you were serious."

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"I'm serious. You're hesitating. Why?"

"I haven't thought about it that much."

"Think about it now. It sounds like a great idea. But why doesn't it feel like a great idea?"

"I don't know," I said. "It just doesn't."

But the more I thought about it, the more I thought I understood. It was obvious that I would never successfully go back and fix everything with Caroline Pocock, the proof being that she despised me so thoroughly in the here and now. Whatever I might try to amend, that was the known outcome.

I said, "Does that explain why the only people I see coming through that door seem to be life's born losers?"

"That's exactly what they are," Morley said. "They're the ones who can't accept what became common knowledge after the first few years. Which is that you gamble everything, and nothing changes. Nothing significant, anyway. The status quo is like one big self-regulating ecology. All that happens is that the balance shifts and whatever you do to try to upset it, it just sets itself right."

"How does that work?"

"Nobody knows. The rules are beyond grasping. If you go back to meet yourself, you won't be there. The past that you return to may not even be the past you left behind. Whatever you try to alter, somehow it all still comes out the same. Or else it's different in a way that suits you no better. There's a whole new branch of fractal mathematics that tries to explain it and what it all comes down to is, there's an infinite number of ways for something to go wrong and only one way for it to go right."

I said, "So the overall effect is like, when you pee in the swimming pool and nobody notices."

Clearly this was an analogy that had never occurred to him, because he stopped and gave me a very strange look before carrying on. He wasn't a healthy-looking man. He had pale eyes and gray-looking skin. His hair had lost most of its color, as well. He dressed as if he didn't care about his appearance, in clothes that most people would have bagged up and sent to a charity shop.

He said, "The people who set these places up thought they'd make a fortune. Most of them went bust within ten years. The rest of us squeeze

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a living from the same bunch of hopeless romantics who think they're the ones who'll beat the system." He gestured toward the public area beyond his office door. "You've seen enough of them by now," he said. "They keep coming back. They're older, they're younger, they're just in a loop thinking, I almost did it then, I'll do it for sure next time. Next time, next time. They scrape up the money and they come limping back. They can't even see how they've thrown away the lives that they set out to fix."

That first returnee of mine was back within the week.

This time, he was much older. I mean, seriously. He was recognizable but he looked as if he'd spent the last couple of decades scavenging for his life in a war zone. Maybe I exaggerate. But not by much. He didn't seem to have washed or shaved in ages. I could smell him from across the room. He just stood there holding onto the wall by the door, as if that last long walk up the road had taken everything out of him.

I said, "Hi."

He fixed on me. I wondered if he was drunk, but when he spoke I was fairly sure that he wasn't. The messages were just taking their time to get through.

He said, "I'm sorry. I've come a long way."

"Can I get you anything?"

He shook his head, and then moved over to where the forms were and pulled out a chair. I made a mental note to tell Morley that the whole area would need a scrub-down with disinfectant and then I realized, with gloom, that the job would fall to me.

I watched the man. The one I now thought of as My Repeater. I'd seen other returnees by now, but he'd been my first. It wasn't so much that he was now old, more that he'd become old before his time. He looked as if he'd been sleeping rough, and I wondered how he'd managed to get his latest stake together. By years of begging and spending nothing, by the look of him.

He brought the paperwork over. I held my breath.

"Just a few last details to get," I said.

"I know," he said.

I went through the usual questionnaire as quickly as I could and when he emptied the money from his pockets onto the counter, I had to force

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myself to pick it up. The grubby notes were in bundles, and there was a lot of small change. I felt as if I wanted to scrub the coins before touching them.

It always had to be cash. Travelers weren't creditworthy. They walked away from their futures when the Big Red Button was pressed, leaving no one to pay off the debts.

I said, "Do you want to take a seat while I count this?"

"I'll just wait here," he said.

And he did, too. He leaned on the counter and watched, with me breathing as shallowly as I could and trying not to rush it so much that I'd make a mistake and have to do it again.

Only days before, I'd seen him in good health. Now he was a shocking wreck. I couldn't imagine what he'd been through and I didn't want to ask. The part that I couldn't get my head around was that although the change seemed like a magical stroke that had happened in a matter of days, it wasn't. While his younger self had been standing before me, this older version had been somewhere out there, probably heading my way. They were all out there, at more or less the same time — every one of his repeated selves, going over and over the same piece of ground. Never meeting, never overlapping, co-existing in some elaborate choreography managed by forces unknown. Causing no ripples, accomplishing nothing, scraping up their cash and heading right back here. The person he was, and all of the people he would ever be. Fixed. Determined. Tripping over the same moment, again and again and again.

I felt a sudden and unaccountable sympathy. It bordered on tenderness, and it was an awkward and unfamiliar feeling; doubly hard to deal with, considering the scent and the state of him.

Lowering my voice so that Morley wouldn't overhear, I said, "Second chances don't come cheap, do they?"

"You give it whatever it takes," he said.

He looked so bleak and downcast that it made me sorry I'd spoken at all.

I had an idea, and I pitched it to Morley.

I said, "If we kept one file on each repeater, it would save us having to cover the same ground every time."

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"You lazy little bugger," he said.

"I'm not being lazy," I protested. "I thought I was being efficient."

"So somebody comes in here and we face him with a file that shows half a dozen returns that he doesn't even know he's going to make yet. What's that going to do to him?"

"Stop him from wasting his life?"

Morley said, "Watch my lips. It's already happened. Nothing's going to change it. All you can do is add to his misery."

And that was the last of my employee suggestions.

I got an hour for lunch, and some days my old school friend Dominic would turn up and we'd walk out along Technology Drive until we reached its lonely end way up in the hills. There we'd sit on a rock and throw stones at bottles until it was time for me to go back.

I must have seemed down that day, because Dominic said, "What's the matter with you?"

"Morley," I said.

"What about him?"

"He's depressing me."

Dominic knew Morley. Partly because it was a small town and everybody knew everybody, if only indirectly, but also because in my first week Morley had made one of his few front-of-house appearances to tell Dominic to stop hanging around the shop and making conversation with me.

He said, "Morley depresses everybody. Even his daughter took her own life rather than listen to his conversation."

This was a surprise. "Seriously?" I said.

"Far as I know."

"When?"

"Years back. When Dinosaurs Ruled the Earth."

I didn't know what to say to this, so I pitched a few more stones at the bottle we'd set up. One of them caught it a glancing blow, and knocked it over. It didn't break, but it fell amongst the remains of countless others that had.

"Who says so?" I wondered aloud as I went over to set it up again.

"My mum," Dominic said. "She used to know him, in the days when he was a human being."

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On the walk down, he told me what he knew of the story, which was very little...just that Morley's daughter had written a note and then opened her wrists while stretched out fully clothed in the bath. She'd cut them lengthways rather than across which, according to Dominic, was proof that she'd meant it. She'd been nineteen. No one knew for certain what her reasons were. Morley had burned the note.

Technology Drive was like an abandoned airstrip. Just being there made you feel guilty and excited with the thrill of trespass, and for no reason at all. It was as wrecked and overgrown as any Inca road, and in its time had served far less purpose. We picked our way down it, stepping from one tilted block to another. The drains had fallen in and all of the roadside wiring had been dug up and stolen. There was also about seven miles of buried fiberoptic cable that no thief had yet been able to think of a use for.

They talked of it as the Boulevard of Failed Business Plans. The cargo-cultists' landing strip for a prosperous future that never came. Crap like that.

Nineteen years old.

I wondered what she'd looked like.

THE AFTERNOON was uneventful. That evening, I borrowed the car and went out with Dominic. We spent most of it in the Net café attached to the local Indian restaurant, and then after I'd dropped him off at home I contrived to drive past Caroline Pocock's house a few times, which is no mean trick for a place down a cul-de-sac. Then I parked and watched for a while. I didn't know which window was hers, but long ago I'd picked one at random and by now I'd convinced myself that it was her bedroom. I stayed there until her father came out in his pajamas and stared at the car and then I took off.

It was after one in the morning when I passed the end of Technology Drive and saw lights in the Bureau's windows. I stopped the car and walked back to the junction. Someone was moving around inside.

Burglars? Looking for what? There was nothing in the place worth stealing. I didn't get too close because I didn't want to be seen. I stayed back in the darkness and waited for another movement. After about a

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minute, I saw who was in there. It was Morley. He wasn't doing anything much. He was just mooching around.

I saw him polish the glass panel in one of the booth doors with his sleeve, I saw him straighten one of the disclaimer signs on the wall. He mostly looked as if he couldn't quite bring himself to go home.

I couldn't imagine why. He lived on his own. There'd be no one waiting there that he might want to avoid.

I didn't get to bed until after two o'clock. I had a restless night. My thinking kept going around in the same circles. If life is lousy and you go back to change it, all that happens is that you fulfill the pattern that delivered your lousy life. Your choices are no choices at all. It seemed all wrong but think about it long enough, and you'd be scared even to breathe.

After all of that, I overslept and had to scramble.

I was late getting in. Morley was there already. I don't think he'd been there all night. He muttered something sarcastic and went off into the back office. The fact of it was that he could have run the place single-handed and saved himself the cost of my miserable wages, if he'd chosen to. What he had me doing was mostly dogsbody work. When I wasn't behind the counter I pushed a mop or answered the phone. The technology, though it was getting pretty old, was maintenance-free and the operation of it was idiot-proof.

I think it was just that he didn't like to go out there and face the clientele anymore.

Around ten-thirty that morning, a taxi drew up outside and this young male of around my own age got out. He was well-dressed and had a sharp-looking haircut. You could tell just by looking at him that here was someone from a good family with money, and that he'd been favored by the education system. Almost everyone from my school slouched, and their mouths hung open in repose. He stood looking the building over as the taxi pulled away, and then he came inside.

He spent twenty minutes or more reading through the forms before he brought them over to the counter.

He said, apologetically, "You'll have to help me with these. I can't work out what I'm supposed to do."

"Sure," I said, and I started to go through everything with him. He'd filled in some of the stuff, and he'd left blank the parts he wasn't clear about.

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This time, I knew it way before I saw the name.

"You've never done this before?" I said.

"Nope," he said. I tried not to stare at him. Here, in the midst of his pattern of recycling visits, was the visit that began it all. He was bright, springy, full of confidence. The only giveaway was a dangerous-looking light in his eyes, but it was like the nerve of a bungee-jumper getting ready to go. In his own mind he knew exactly what had to be done, and he was about to step out and do it.

I went to get Morley's approval on the paperwork. My thoughts were racing.

Back at the counter, the young man was waiting. He was tapping out a drumbeat on the counter's edge with the fingernails of both hands.

"Everything all right?" he said.

"Everything's fine," I said with forced brightness.

"When do I go? Do I go right now?"

I lowered my voice and said, "Can I say something to you first?"

My repeater stopped his nervous drumming and looked at me; polite, puzzled, curious.

I said, "Walk away from this. Get on with your life. Whatever you think you're going to change, I can tell you for certain it won't work."

"Thanks for the advice," he said. "But I know exactly what I've got to do."

So then I did what I'd been warned against. "Just one moment," I said.

Then I went and got the records of his last few visits. The ones that I'd witnessed, but that he'd yet to live through.

I laid them on the counter for him to see.

He looked at them. Then he looked at me. The light in his eyes was still there, but it had changed. He wasn't so certain anymore, and I could see that he was scared.

"What's all this?" he said.

"That's you," I said. "That's your entire life if you don't walk away."

He stared down at the papers again. They all carried his signature.

I've got him, I was thinking. It was a risk, but it's working.

"Fuck you," he said. "Do what I've paid for, or get me your supervisor."

But Morley was already coming out of the back office. "All right," I

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started to say, "forget I even spoke." I could hear the desperation in my voice as I started to backtrack, but it was too late.

Morley said, "What's the problem?"

"I thought you people gave a service," my repeater said, and he pointed toward me. "Since when was it his job to interfere in my private business?"

Morley looked down, and saw the files on the counter.

"There's been a misunderstanding, sir," he said then, raking them toward him and dropping them under the counter without giving them a second glance. Then he looked at me and said, with a considerable chill factor, "Go and wait in my office."

I went into the back, but I could still hear them talking.

"Booth four, sir," I heard Morley say. "I hope it works out for you."

"I reckon it will," I heard the young man say.

A couple of minutes later, the young man was on his journey and I was on the carpet.

"What do you think you're playing at?" Morley said.

"I was just trying to save him a load of grief."

"He's got a load of grief. Sometimes it's just a person's lot to live it out."

"You didn't see his face when he looked at his file."

"I told you, no files. Didn't you hear me?" He rammed the point home with his forefinger in my chest, stabbing me with every word. "You don't...show...the clients...their...fucking...files."

"If you'd only stayed out of it," I pressed on, "I'll bet you anything I could have convinced him. I was almost there. I could have rescued a wasted life."

"You know nothing," Morley said, but I was warming to my theme now; now that there was no chance of being proved wrong, I was starting to believe that I'd had control of the situation prior to Morley's interference.

"I bet he was just about to turn," I said, "and then you had to come wading in."

"He's on rails," Morley said dismissively. "We're all on rails. Knowing it won't make any difference."

"But what if things *do* change?" I argued, and suddenly the doubts that I'd been unable to articulate all fell into place like jointed plates.

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"What are you talking about?"

I said, "Maybe things change all the time and we just don't know it. Maybe your daughter wouldn't be dead now if you weren't too pigheaded to go back and fix what went wrong."

Bad move.

I knew then that I'd gone too far. I also knew that it was too late to take it back.

Morley just stood there and closed his eyes. I could see the whites flickering where the lids didn't quite meet. He took a shuddering breath and swayed a little. I thought for a moment that he was starting a fit, but it was just that I'd never seen anyone in the grip of such bone-shaking, overwhelming anger before.

He said, "Get out of my place."

He was barely audible. My hands were shaking as I gathered my stuff together and as I was going out of the door that he held open for me, I couldn't bring myself to look back at him.

I heard him say, "I've forgiven you an awful lot since you came to work here. I can see now I let you get away with too much."

"Sorry," I said.

"Not sorry enough," were his last words to me.

I couldn't eat that night, and I felt so sick about it all that I couldn't tell anyone why. It wasn't just that I'd never been fired from a job before. And it wasn't because I'd failed with my repeater, because I'd been onto a loser there from the beginning — the very evidence that I'd tried to show him had been proof in my hands that he'd continue. I just wished I could have taken back what I'd said to Morley about his daughter.

But there it was. You can't change what's passed.

Unless.

Unless I was right. For some odd reason I kept thinking about the spreadsheet we used to work out the charges. When you changed one little thing deep down, everything shifted around as a result. It made a whole new picture.

Maybe we're just talking about the spreadsheet of everything. There's no past as such, there's just the big "is." No final, bottom line, just an endless middle. Updating all the time, undergoing constant changes in the

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always-has-been. Our certainties rewriting themselves from one instant to the next. For every miserable repeater, maybe there are a thousand happy and successful travelers whose journey simply vanished from the record once their misery was removed and the journey became unnecessary.

Not a bad leap. For someone so young, naïve and stupid.

I know that there are brain-damaged people who live entirely in the moment, whose memories fade in the instant they're formed. They need a notebook so they can keep checking on who they are, where they live and where they're from, who all these strangers around them might be.

Maybe this whole time thing's just a magic notebook.

And we're just the readers who believe all that we see.

THE NEXT MORNING, I confessed to my mother about losing the job. It was that, or go through the pretense of getting dressed and going out early with no reason. She wasn't as surprised as I thought she'd be, but she asked about my unpaid wages. I hadn't even thought about them, and I really didn't feel like facing Morley again. But then when she started to talk about going with me to make sure that I got what I was due, I made hasty arrangements to go back alone.

The building on Technology Drive was all closed up. I looked in through all the windows but nobody was there.

So I went away, and returned late in the afternoon. By then someone had called the police out. Two uniformed officers had turned up in a van, along with a man that I recognized as the owner of a big women's wear shop in the middle of town. I mean it was a big shop, not that it sold stuff to big women. It was called "Enrico et Nora" and he was Enrico. I didn't know it at the time, but he was Morley's sleeping partner in the business. The policemen were getting ready to break the door in.

I said, "Can I ask what's going on?"

"It's bolted on the inside," Enrico said. "Who are you?" The police wanted to know who I was as well, so I told them.

Then they brought this heavy thing on handles out of the van, and used it to batter the door in.

Nobody said I couldn't follow them inside, so I did.

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I'd walked through the same door every working day for the past couple of months, but now it didn't feel right. All the lights were on, even though it was daytime. I was tensed for something awful. I know it may sound melodramatic, but it felt like the kind of scenario that precedes the discovery of a lonely death.

One of the officers had his head inside one of the booths. He pulled it out and said, "How do those things work?"

"It takes two people," I explained. "One to travel and one to operate from the outside. There's a system so one person can't do both."

They started looking in each of the booths, I'd guess in case Morley was lying in one of them.

But I was looking over at the counter.

The anglepoise lamp from Morley's office was standing on it. When I glanced over into booth five, I could see that there was one of our keycards in the activating slot. Back on the counter, the lamp was positioned in such a way that the edge of its metal shade rested squarely on the Big Red Button.

He'd have had maybe a minute to get himself into the booth as the lamp slowly descended.

The settings on the machine meant nothing to me, but I could imagine where they'd led. I don't know if he'd aimed to get there hours before, to prevent the child from killing herself, or months before, to divert her from wanting to.

I told them all about it.

And even as I was telling them, I looked out through the window.

I knew that he couldn't have succeeded, of course. I knew it because I lived in a world where Morley's daughter lay long-dead in her grave and I'd seen the damaged plaything that loss had made of her father. If he'd gone back and saved her, then none of that could ever have happened. But it had.

I could see a figure heading up Technology Drive, walking from where the bus had dropped him off. I couldn't see his features yet, but I could read the determination in his stride.

Next time, his attitude seemed to say. I almost did it then, I'll do it for sure next time.

The police went into the back to look through the papers in Morley's

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desk. Enrico went looking for a phone to call his lawyer. I moved around to my usual place behind the counter.

And there I waited, to see which of my repeaters it would be.

She's Her Mother's Daughter

By Robert Frazier

There are no memories of a past life for her,
no such transference in the clonal processes,
just a kind of *presence*
faint as finger prints,
as fractures in the lunar crust.

Her face cuts a profile in holography
as familiar as her origin-mother's, and as
commanding, like that in the last grainy vids
downloaded from the Giant Orientale basin,
astonished eyes staring into the wall breech.

Her body casts the same willowy shadow,
stitched along the circular bottom
of the colony's grav pool,
black as solar panels during eclipse,
capable of sudden power.

And, too, there is this:
her irises open the same airlocks.

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Robert Onopa is the author of the novel The Pleasure Tube *and a regular contributor to our pages. His last story here was "The Grateful Dead" in August, 1998. He lives in Kailua, Hawaii and works as a professor at the University of Honolulu. (At the moment, however, he's spending a year abroad, teaching at Victoria University in Wellington, New Zealand.) Mr. Onopa says this story was inspired by watching the full moon rise from over the sea while listening to some friends in the hotel business complain about a slump in tourism. Perhaps this charming story will pick things up (although we'll need some help from NASA first...).*

Name That Moon

By Robert Onopa

THE LUNAR LANDER descended onto the dusty pad, the fading blue crescent on its side — the Blue Moon Resort's logo — lost in the rising dust. As the lander touched the pad, it yawed unsteadily before bumping gently back down.

Please, I prayed, *no glitches.* I looked at my watch: the media conference was scheduled to begin in two hours.

Finally the lunar dust, the regolith, settled in low-grav slo-mo and the small Menelaus Crater that defined the equatorial end of the Sea of Serenity reemerged behind the pad, bright with sunlight, crisp with detail. That was my personal signal that I could safely proceed. I licked my lips and pushed the unfamiliar joystick to propel the transfer vehicle Stewart had assigned me for the event, a kind of pressurized minivan, into a docking with the lander. By docking, we bring our guests to the resort without the hassle of an EVA.

The treads of the transfer vehicle crunched satisfyingly over the regolith and onto the pad. When the docking collars started to engage at

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a meter's distance, I checked my softscreen one last time. To my dismay, Karl Pope, the Chief Editor of *Condé Nast Spacetravel*, the man I'd come to pick up, was now listed as "scrubbed." I hurriedly called up the new data.

They'd sent his assistant, a woman named Claire Albricht.

Netsearch flashed a list of projects she'd been involved in — for Linux/Hilton, for The Aston Mazda Group. She was apparently a marketing whiz, but it was Karl Pope himself, one of the travel media's heavy hitters, we'd been counting on to give credibility to our press conference.

His loss was another blow. If our new marketing campaign couldn't raise our occupancy rate, Blue Moon would have to close. I pictured myself being fitted for one of those yellow helmets they wore at the mining camp, breathing dusty air, shoveling ore to be fired for Helium 3.

I peered out across the landscape through the big van window and took a deep breath. Above the rocky plain that formed the Sea of Serenity, Earth hung in the black sky like a milk-swirled pearl, immense and bright. Yet it was the sight of *Mare Serenitatis* itself, its vast rolling face cupped by bright far cliffs, that brought me peace, that settled and centered me.

Then a wild mass of strawberry blonde hair pushed through the docking membrane. She was in her mid-thirties, a bit shaky. My heart skipped a beat — Claire Albricht's bleary green eyes had a wounded quality, and her expression was unhappy, but none of that, not even her baggy radiation suit or her black lipstick, could hide the fact that she was an attractive woman.

"Welcome to Hyatt Regency Fiat Blue Moon," I said, helping her stow her spacecase. "I'm Charley Shackleton. Hyatt PR. Call me Shack."

"Claire Albricht. *Ough*," she grunted, grabbing the armrest with one pale hand, bracing the other against the headliner.

"You're not going to float away," I reassured her. "There's gravity here."

"That was worse than flying to Australia."

"You'll feel better," I said. "Give it a day."

She glared out the big side window as I started up the transfer vehicle. "Where's the resort?" Claire Albricht asked.

She could keep the lipstick — too New York — but I liked her silver earrings, her long neck. "Ninety percent of the resort's below the surface,"

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I explained, telling her something most guests know before they get here. "Protects everybody from impacts and temperature extremes — nights here get down to 240 below."

She closed her eyes. "What do you mean, impacts?"

I wondered if she'd even glanced at her information packet. "Without an atmosphere to burn it up," I said, "space debris comes right in." I waved ahead at the pocked surface, the craters and scattered pits. "Which gives us our, um, moonscape."

"There's nothing here but rocks," she said flatly. "Nothing at all."

I bit my tongue. As we rounded the foot of the Menelaus Crater, the near folded cliffs of the Montes Haemus Range rose to form the equatorial border of the Sea. With Earth high behind us now, the shadowed curtains of rock were crowned by a sky brilliant with stars, all the colors of the rainbow shot through with white. "How about that?" I asked.

She frowned at the cliffs and blinked. "This has got to be the most desolate place I've ever seen."

"Well, there's lots to do," I said, feeling my jaw go tight. "Ice skating, swimming, golf. Three restaurants, a spa. We've got everything an Earthside resort's got."

The big dome sheltering our lobby swung into view, marked with the Blue Moon crescent. We passed a couple in pressurized suits riding a treaded golf cart toward the course inside the crater, a sign of life which only seemed to call attention to the twenty empty carts at the starter's pod. It was hard to hide our problem.

"I've been trying to imagine what would make it worthwhile for Hyatt to fly us all up. I mean, in these days of virtuality, a *press* conference?"

I docked at the canopied port without comment and let the valets take over. Truth to tell, it was United's extra-orbital division that was eating the expense of flying up the media. The new promotion was a last ditch effort to keep business going for them, too.

Once inside, as the desk clerk took a retinal scan for room entry, I noticed how red-rimmed her eyes were, how watery. Wads of Kleenex stuck out of her pockets. As much as she annoyed me, I felt a wave of pity and restrained my impulse to book her next to the rattling ice machine in the Kepler Wing.

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At least she noticed the Waterfall of Diana in the lobby, the one you walk behind on the way to the Atrium. "You'd never guess this was even possible," she said above its soft thunder as we passed into the big atrium. "And there's so much light."

There was vegetation too, and I directed her to a meandering path among leggy ferns and palms. "All thanks to our fusion plant up at the pole — we've got a great supply of Helium 3."

She extracted a wad of Kleenex the size of a baseball from a pocket and buried her nose in it. "This is such an awful day for me," she sniffled. I stood there, waiting for her to say something else, but she just kept blowing her nose, and so I took her by the elbow and led her toward her room, telling her about our flock of pigeons.

At the brass-doored elevators down I looked over and she was glaring at me suspiciously. Head case, I decided. "Media presentation at two," I said brightly. "I'll bet you can't wait to get online and tell the world when you hear what this is about."

BARRY STEWART — Blue Moon Resort's General Manager — adjusted his blazer and glowered nervously, sweat beading just below his hairline. We had refitted our unused Copernicus Ballroom as a media center, complete with VR cameras for Earthside realtime holocast, full wall screens on three sides, net guides and browser pages windowed in. A full screen hi-D/3D moonmap hovered behind the dais, the resort keyed in with bright colors. The techs had done a wonderful job.

The media reps we'd shuttled up were augmented by an equal number of our own employees to flesh out the crowd. Still, it was a disappointing sight: interns instead of editors (from Orbit/ExtraGeo), location scouts instead of producers (from The Virtual Travel Channel), small crews instead of live feeds (from Extreme Outside and Space), our fitness instructor instead of anybody from Offworld. At the side door I was trying to keep Stewart from taking another hit from the silver flask he'd started carrying.

"Barry," I said, "we're going to change history. Tell them that."

"This better goddamned work," he muttered.

Claire Albricht walked unsteadily into the room, creases in her

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jumpsuit, wild strands rising from her blonde hair. I sat her beside a giggling couple whom I introduced as prizewinners from OsakaHoneyMoon and she bared her teeth.

As usual, when the crunch came, Stewart was great. He paced back and forth on the little stage, first warming up the audience with stories from the Apollo landings, a holographic full moon radiant behind him. He told us of the resort's conception and heyday, how in the ten years it had been in operation we employees had developed a special relationship with "this dear old rock." Over the past few years, he explained, like a kindly uncle relating how a family had drifted apart, the residents of Earth seemed to forget about the moon and the amazingly engineered resort and spa through which it can be experienced. "Nowadays the traffic goes to the orbiting hotels, right? Sheraton Geosync, Caesar's Sky Palace, Satellite 6? Well, I'm here to tell you it's time to think *moon* again."

He took a deep breath and said, "I've had a vision."

According to Stewart — and this was the first time I'd heard *this* version of the story — he'd been out on an extended EVA surveying the Apollo 11 site for a potential hotel excursion. Out there alone, he'd found himself thinking about the moon not just as a compelling landscape but as a presence, a spirit, though a spirit that lacked a face, some way to evoke it. He'd wanted to speak to it, he said, but there was no name to call it by.

It was a testament to his charm that a hush fell over the sixty cynical media people in that room.

"...leading me to the reason we've brought you here today. In cooperation with United Space, Hyatt Regency Fiat Blue Moon is proud to announce a marketing campaign that will change the way humans will see the heavens — the way lovers and sailors and astronauts and astronomers will see the night sky — until the end of time."

Now he really had everyone's attention.

"Out there at Apollo Site, I realized that, unlike every other body in the solar system — unlike every planet, unlike *their* moons, Titan, Phobos and Io, say — or even unlike asteroids Chiron, Hermes and Neseus — *Earth's* moon — now listen carefully — *Earth's moon does not have a name.*"

"Let me repeat: *the only completely natural satellite of Earth has no proper, formal name.*" He let the information sink in — it was one of those

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obvious arrangements that went unnoticed. "All through history, we haven't been using a 'name,' we've been using a 'term,' a *generic term*, 'moon'" — Stewart made the word sound cowlike, repulsive — "to signify a very unique place."

"It's time to correct this oversight. With the full compliance and authority of the International Astronomical Union, the official naming body for asteroids, comets and stars, Hyatt Regency Fiat has secured rights in perpetuity to a proper name for Earth's moon." Stewart smiled. "I see from the dataprompters that our audience is building Earthside," he observed.

The girl from The Space Channel, a chubby brunette with a battered headset, was scurrying around to check her live feed; all around the Copernicus Room equipment was being touched and tweaked.

"Of course, the *choice* of a name for the moon belongs to the human race as a whole. And so — listen carefully again — we've created a contest with a few simple rules. From the moment I initialize our dedicated netsite, NAME THAT MOON, we will take nominations and votes for a name for the moon. Individuals logging onto the site will be entitled to one vote per Earth day. The voting will continue around the clock for seven days. At the end of the week, the moon will have a new, official name."

Contest regs scrolled behind him as Stewart raised his right arm. "Please join us, citizens of Earth, as we NAME THAT MOON!"

When his arm came down the new Netsite washed over all the screens and the crowd in the Copernicus Room flitted around like carp at feeding time. Correspondents shouted questions, bumped one another, waved their arms to be recognized, shouldered their way to the center aisle. The Osaka couple stood on their chairs. It must have been too much for Claire Albricht, whom I saw with her head in her hands.

Candace Yuen, from our marketing department, joined Stewart, describing how random voters would be chosen to win trips, mylar excursion suits, even have their names assigned to darkside craters. Above the din she started touting VR tours of the resort for the Earthside audience.

On the wallscreen behind the dais a list of names started to grow: Artemis, Hoku, Luna, New America.... In the tally window, numbers were already starting to rise like the bounce from the audience. An excited

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crowd in low grav is distinctive: gestures are more expansive, heads bob, people move more. Stewart was taking questions, Candace was laughing, and I zeroed in on the tall Chinese editor from HyperWire, who'd promised a week-long feature in realtime holo in exchange for the golf pass I had in my pocket.

I saw Claire Albricht again on my way out. She was alone against the back wall, looking dazed, her wad of Kleenex in her fist. Her lipstick was faded.

"What do you think?" I asked, sitting beside her, trying to be friendly.

She looked at me sideways. "This is a really bizarre idea. Who does Hyatt Fiat think it is? All the names here are so ancient. Greek. Roman."

"As a matter of *fact*," I informed her, "farside names are modern — craters named Oppenheimer and Fermi, the Sea of Moscow."

"Well, it's still pretty amazing." She shook her head. "When's my flight back?"

"What?"

"I'm ready to leave. When's my flight back?"

I exhaled through my teeth. "The deal with Condé Nast is, you're *supposed* to be putting together a story based on live reports. A *week's* worth. You're up here for the duration. Didn't you even know *that*?"

A dark look crossed her face. The largest wad of Kleenex I'd ever seen came out of her pocket and floated to her eyes like one of the plump misty cumulus that condense up in the dome.

This time my sympathy ran out. "You don't know the first thing about us," I told her. "You don't know why you're here. You're with us three hours and you already want to leave. Couldn't Condé Nast have spared someone who was at least remotely interested?"

The damp wad floated down and her eyes welled with tears. I heard a small voice.

"*What*?"

"I'm sorry," she said.

She buried her head in her hands and sobbed. Then she composed herself and looked at me bleary-eyed. "I s...said, I'm *sorry*. I'm sorry I'm taking it out on you. I've been having such an awful time. I broke up with.... Oh, you don't know him. He and I, Karl and I...."

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"Karl?"

"Three days ago, we're at Kennedy. He's booked to come here, I'm booked to go to Maui. I told him — and it's really hard to tell somebody it's over, you're supposed to do it in a public place, right? And he didn't get it. I mean, *I* broke up with him, gave him my rehearsed speech, and he doesn't understand. It gets so bad I go, 'Don't you get it? You're *dumped.* What part of "I'm moving out of the condo" don't you get?' and the *next* thing I know...."

"Karl Pope? From Condé Nast?"

She sniffed, nodded. "I shouldn't have used the word 'dumped,' right? The next thing I know he takes *my* ticket to Maui and he gives me *his* to *here* and he goes, 'Good-bye, you bimbo.' He called me a *bimbo.* I knew I never should have dated my boss." She was burbling. "I feel so awful."

I sighed. "Well, Claire, listen. How about keeping us out of your plans for revenge. We're just trying to survive here. Maybe you've noticed?"

She sniffled. "That's a fact. You hardly have any real guests. Sorry."

"And you're not even a travel writer."

"Well, I *do* know about marketing," she said. "That's what I'm saying. You could be doing better."

"Is that right? Tell me about it."

"Would you be a little less pissed?"

"I could try."

She took a breath, blinked to clear her eyes. "Okay. To begin with, you don't use your hotel manager to announce a campaign. That's so minor league. If you want real publicity, you get a celebrity. You get somebody who brings an audience with them."

"Like who?"

"Like, I don't know. Shirley Taylor. Lance Jason. Art Ball. Art Ball would have been perfect."

"Art Ball?" I snorted. "The talk show host? The one who's part Artificial Intelligence?" I pretended disbelief, but the truth was I listened to Art Ball myself. I'd even brought his name up with Candace, but after the look she'd given me I'd been too embarrassed to take the idea further. "Art Ball's over a hundred and fifty years old. The human parts of him, anyway."

"He's got the largest single listening audience on Earth. Tops two billion." She sniffled. "Oh, *Earth.* I miss Earth."

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"There's nothing I can do to fly you back," I said. "But, look, you could have a good time while you're here if you'd give it a chance. We've got a pool, bars, a gym. Golf."

"My therapist did tell me to start something new, to get some exercise."

"There's a schedule downloaded to your softscreen. Banquet tonight. Moon range chicken."

She sniffled into the Kleenex. "I don't think I feel like eating."

"How about tomorrow? I'll show you some of our facilities." I checked my softscreen; I was booked for lunch with two Italian PR men. "I'll be free at two?"

"Ough," she said, sniffling. "Ough-kay."

That night at midnight I sat on my bunk picking stringy chicken from my teeth, feeling sorry for myself — since Samantha'd left a year ago, my quarters just seemed empty. I was listening to web radio from Earthside, watching my autodialer strobe on my softscreen. To my surprise the faint flashing stopped, the speakerphone booted up, and a nasal voice said, "Hello?" A hot flash of self-consciousness shot through my body. I cleared my throat.

"Uh, hello. Art?"

"Yes."

"Art Ball?"

"Well, who'd you expect?" the familiar voice of Art Ball groused over the speakerphone. "We don't have screeners here, like some other shows."

"First-time caller, long-time listener," I recited. "I can't believe I got through. Great show, Art."

"I'm getting a delay. Are you up on one of the satellites? At L1?"

"Calling from the moon, Art. This is Shack...."

"WELL, TURN YOUR RADIO DOWN, SHACK," Art Ball started bellowing. "BETTER YET, TURN IT *OFF*. HOW MANY TIMES DO I HAVE TO TELL YOU LISTENERS TO TURN YOUR RADIOS OFF WHEN YOU GET IN?"

I fumbled with my keypad to cut the speaker, my hand shaking. "Art? Still there?"

"That's better. What's on your mind?"

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"Art, I know you're interested in the great adventure of space...."

"And what's your point?"

"I'm just saying, have you heard about that webvote, NAME THAT MOON?"

"Right."

"Art, it would be great to see the good people who are behind this incredible idea get a real show of interest...."

"Caller, are you one of our Helium 3 miners?"

"Uh, no."

A long silence filled my quarters. "Let me guess," Ball's voice snaked out like a slo-mo whip. "You're an employee of Hyatt Fiat. You know how we feel about the New Solar Order down here?"

"The *what*?" I vaguely recalled an old U.N. proposal that claimed sovereignty over the moon, to which Hyatt had signed off. Some glitch in Ball's AI software must have locked onto the Hyatt reference and his opposition to it. "Art," I said emphatically, "This is not a political thing...."

"You people think you can use my airtime for propaganda? Listen to this, Shack."

The signal went dead with a thunk. My face flushed, and my eyes burned. My speakerphone hissed with the vastness of space.

I gave Claire Albricht the tour, starting with the ice rink. We saw spectacular jumps and the rapture of average skaters working out their first triple axels in one-sixth gravity. A couple from Minnesota took turns launching 360 overflights at center ice.

After a night's sleep Claire looked refreshed, looked better than she deserved to look. Her lipstick today was dark plum, an improvement. She told me she wasn't much of an athlete.

"It's different here," I told her. "Low gravity."

My point was demonstrated when, on the way to showing her our diving boards — diving is like flying here — we cut through a workout room with thick pads on its floor and filled with gymnastics equipment — parallel bars, rings, a pommel horse.

She grimaced. "Here's my torture chamber from high school."

"Try something."

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"Aw...."

"Just one thing."

She took one low grav step toward a pommel horse without much enthusiasm. And, astonished, she found herself sitting on the horse. "Hey," she said, "that was...amazing."

She bounced down and tried it again.

Next she tried the parallel bars — slipped off, didn't hurt herself, bounced back up again. She was smiling like a kid. "I could never do anything like this on Earth."

We looked over the spa, the whirlpool, the climbing wall, the weight room, but we came back to the gymnastics equipment.

"Can I use this gym?"

"Right now, if you want to. The concierge will give you a locker, bring you the right clothes."

"Thanks," she said. "You're pretty nice after all. Can I get a rain check on your invitation?"

I thought of the Hubble Room, pricey even with the employee discount — though if the hotel was going to close in a week, it might be my last chance to eat there. "Lunch tomorrow," I said, and she said, "It's a date."

LATER I CHECKED in with Barry Stewart at the Copernicus Room. He was alone, though a quartet of remote VR cameras servoed back and forth from stations along the side walls and made it seem like we were being watched. That turned out to be wishful thinking.

"How'd our first day turn out?" I asked. Out of superstition, actually dread, I'd avoided looking at the website.

"Could be better," he mumbled. He was chewing his thumb.

I finally looked. "A hundred and sixty thousand votes total from Earthside?"

His expression was pained. "Actual hits less than projections," he said. "That number's a bit inflated."

I'd gotten close enough to where he sat hunched over a terminal to smell alcohol on his breath. He was wearing the same blazer he'd worn the previous night at the banquet — you could tell from the faux Bernaise

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sauce on his lapel. "It'll pick up," I said to cheer him. "Anyway, who's ahead?" I read from the wallscreen. "Diana. In second place, there's Artemis. All the old space junkies liked that name back in the last century, still do, I guess. I don't find an entry listed in third place."

"I'm, uh, leaving it off the official results. You know how we assign each voter a password to make sure they vote only once a day? Apparently the line about 'enter password' is confusing."

"Oh, Christ," I said. "You mean third place is 'password'?"

He worked on his thumb. "A quarter of the votes."

"Cripes. The moon could be named 'Password.'" I looked over his shoulder and saw a long list of what I took to be Native American names following "password" on his softscreen. "Some nice ideas," I said.

"Thanks," he said wryly. "I made those up."

A knot of Helium 3 miners crowded the stainless steel bar Claire and I passed through on our way to the Hubble Room the next day. Even dressed in clean red jumpsuits, the miners, men and women both, looked grubby, skinny from long-time low grav work, squinty-eyed from living in low light.

I steered Claire past. After a day working out in the spa and pool she looked vibrant and healthy, looked great, which didn't escape one of the male miners, who clowned falling off his barstool.

"I still don't get it," Claire was saying. "What's wrong with the word 'moon'?"

"It's not a *name*," I told her, pulling her chair back. The Hubble Room overlooked the southern end of the pool, just above the waterfall up in the atrium, just below the level at which clouds formed late in the lunar cycle. It was our grandest spot. "The word 'moon' comes from an Old Germanic base for the word 'month,' which itself comes from the IndoEuropean word for measure. A 'moon' is a device to measure time in the sky. It's not a proper name."

"Luna, then. The ancient name is Luna." She waved vaguely at our false sky, the inside of the dome, painted with fanciful stars and our blue crescent logo.

"A second rank Roman goddess. I looked her up. Not a single legend to her credit. And the name's never stuck. You say to somebody in

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Manhattan, let's go to Luna, they think you mean some town in upstate New York."

"Artemis?"

"Another name that sounds like a town upstate, but otherwise an excellent candidate. Artemis was Apollo's sister. Moon, sun. Still second in the voting."

"According to my sources, your contract with the Astronomical Union's airtight, so I guess it's going to be your call." She scanned her menu. "Heavenly Fettucini and Moon Pie. Cute."

I noticed her nose was still a bit red.

"And what are you going to do if the hotel closes?" she asked.

"It's hard for me to imagine leaving," I told her.

She rolled her eyes. "Believe it or not, I'm just having salad. I'm signed up for back to back aerobics classes."

Claire skipped the evening's banquet. I drank too much at the United party afterwards and wound up stopping at the Copernicus Room around midnight. Candace was there with a triple Cappuccino. Stewart's tie was askew, his voice hollow. I could smell something different on his breath — he'd switched to Southern Comfort, a bad sign.

"Look at this...," he muttered. "How can the Lakota sue us over the name Hatara? We can't be 'appropriating' that name. I made it up."

"They made it up first," Candace pointed out.

I looked at the other traffic. "What's this 'Moonbeam Laser' product?" I asked. "Can *they* really sue us?"

"Check out the message from 'Wicken.org,'" Candace said. "When the lawyers have some free time, they should look into the legality of this curse."

"It's awful," Stewart said. "Even bookings are down. What did we do wrong?"

I shrugged, staring dully at the holo moon on the front wall, cycling through its phases.

"Shack?"

"The only plausible explanation I've heard so far is that we need a celebrity spokesman."

"Like who?" he snorted. "Art Ball?"

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"Well," I said as brightly as I could, "I think I heard somebody mention his name."

Candace laughed so hard she shot Cappuccino out her nose.

Claire Albricht had turned into a low-grav exercise junkie. She put in hours on the "big steps" in aerobics classes, and on the gymnastics equipment, swam for countless laps, even started diving from the ten meter board. I stopped by to watch her — by her invitation — as I took breaks from full buffet breakfasts, media briefings, cocktail parties, ten-course banquets.

She was fun to watch. Moonies are skinny. She had some flesh.

On day four she invited *me* to lunch at the juice bar next to the spa.

"I hope I'm not being a pest," I said. "Everybody else is lizarding out in the Jacuzzis, pigging out in the banquets."

"I used to do that," she said. "Now I feel like a new person. Karl is so history. As if I hadn't already made it on my own."

"Ah."

"It's true. I was Director of Marketing for The Four Seasons. Which has to do with my plan for when I get back." The new Claire had stopped wearing lipstick altogether. She still had a little red around her nose, but otherwise looked great, her skin smooth and fresh, her eyes clear and bright.

My eyes, on the other hand, felt like they had sand in them. "Wish I had your drive," I said, "your resilience."

"You need a plan, too, for when this place folds. When I get back to New York I'm going to set up a consulting firm in resort marketing. You're a sharp guy. That kind of job would work for you. Relocate and I'll hire you."

"Like I say, I can't imagine living anywhere else."

"What do you see in bare rocks?"

"You haven't gone outside yet, have you?"

"Hands full right here, thanks. Get in shape before I go back, be ready for it." She actually rubbed her hands together; she was wonderful, all energy and enthusiasm; you could see the rosin embedded in her palms. She smiled at me. "Though I could take a break."

My heart skipped a beat. "There's a trip I have to take tomorrow," I

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told her. "A long ride out in the transfer van to the Armstrong Site. How about coming along?"

That night, late, I lay on my bunk listening to Web audio again, that great throwback. Of course we run on a different "day" up here, with our light/dark cycle adjusted to Earth's, so my atrium window was a soft blanket of darkness.

"Thanks for taking my call, Art," I heard a male voice say, a voice heavy with a tired slur, a familiar voice. The hair rose on the back of my neck and I sat up. "First-time caller, long-time listener, Art," the voice said.

I heard the clink of a silver flask. I could almost smell the thick sweetness of Southern Comfort.

The call was brief, even by Art Ball standards. "We have a voiceprint on you, General Manager Stewart," Art Ball snarled. "We're not taking calls from you New Solar Order people."

You could hear Barry starting to protest as he was cut off, but only half his word came out, and his "Arrrr...." made him sound like a dog.

"Wild card line, east of the Urals, you're on the air," Art said to someone else. "Can you imagine that guy?"

"A road?" Claire said. "A road on the moon?"

"A track," I corrected her. "Nobody's allowed to build a road on the moon. This isn't something you can see from Earth. We run semi-inflated treads and make a hundred kilometers per hour without leaving much impact — the embedded track guides us around boulders, crevasses, collapsed lava tubes."

She moved the picnic basket the hotel kitchen had packed for us back with the folding chairs and tables, the crates of bunting, the box of collector quality flags, the EVA suits, the spare life support stuff, the tools. My assignment was to scout a media event at Tranquility Base — Stewart was considering pulling out all the stops — and the rear of the transfer van was stuffed with equipment we'd want down there.

Claire leaned against the thick lexan window, trying to get a better view. "It's so different when you're not spacesick," she mused. "So clear. It's like my eyesight's better."

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"No atmosphere," I reminded her.

In my mirror Blue Moon's main dome was receding rapidly. Ahead lay boulders and craters sprinkled across the regolith stretching away to the horizon, a horizon on which you could see the very shape of the moon's curvature.

"Amazing," Claire agreed.

I accelerated and toggled in the object radar to avoid any unpleasant surprises.

"This is really out there," she said quietly.

THE RUN TO the '69 landing site, Tranquility Base, takes you east along the shore of the Sea of Serenity to a break in its high bordering ridge near the Plinius Crater. From there what we now called Armstrong Site is a straight drive south across the center of the other major lowland in this quadrant of the moon, the *Mare Tranquillitatis*. To reach the site, you traverse the Sea of Tranquility until you reach a long feature called the Rima Hypotia, just north of the lunar equator, and then you turn east.

Along the way, especially near Plinius, you encounter ridging, massive rimes and collapsed lava tubes, but those aside, you also see wonderful flat patches across the regolith. You see every kind of landscape the moon offers.

We had a long talk, Claire and I, as we drove. I recalled how when I was a kid, my dad had told me about watching the first moon landing when *he* was a kid and how, when I'd first set foot on the original landing site I'd felt connected to him in a way that had surprised me, connected with some dream of his in that Detroit suburb in whose back yard he watched the heavens. Maybe I was overdoing it, but even now, I told Claire, Tranquility Base seemed to me a sacred spot, a spiritual place, not unlike Machu Picchu. "Or Haleakala, that enormous high caldera in Hawaii."

"That's where I've seen this landscape before," she mused. "It's like being around the Hawaii volcanoes."

"Only up here it goes on forever. That's what I like about the lunar surface," I told her. "It's raw planet, as primitive as it gets."

"You don't want to see it become terraformed?"

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"Not me. I like it just the way it is. Full of promise. Old and tough and full of promise."

She saw it first, a reflected blip of light from the replica lunar lander that had been installed at the site. "There it is," she said.

Sure enough, in the middle distance the spidery legs and drum-shaped body glinted in the sunlight. We closed in quickly.

"There's the American flag," Claire said when she spotted the little Old Glory left by Armstrong, with its horizontal batten to make it wave. I started telling her how it had been knocked flat when the Apollo crew had taken off, and how NASA had reconstructed the site, when she wondered out loud about debris around the lander. I thought at first she was seeing the scientific instruments the crew had left behind, the ESAP equipment, the passive seismometer.

Then I noticed the crude writing on the lander's side.

The childish yellow letters read, NOTHING COULD BE FINER THAN TO MAKE IT WITH A MINER.

I brought the van to a stop, rubbed my eyes, and sighed. "I don't suppose I should be surprised," I said. "They tagged the starter's pod on the golf course last year with the same color paint."

Ration wrappers and beer tubes littered the site near a burst waste cylinder. The white bunting hanging from the ladder turned out to be toilet paper. "They've trashed the whole site." To my great dismay I saw dozens of fresh bootprints stomped at the foot of the lander's ladder.

"So rude," Claire said. "Those people from the bar?"

"Two years ago they put laundry soap in the Falls of Diana."

"So adolescent. That tag is obscene."

I unbuckled my harness and moved some cartons to fish out the toolbox and service supplies. After rooting around I turned up with a can of hydraulic fluid in the emergency kit. Then I started struggling into my EVA suit.

"Where are you going?"

"I think this'll get the paint off," I told her, waving the can. "I'm going to try to restore things as best I can and clean up out there. But hey," I added when I saw her pulling on the baggy leggings, "not you."

"I wouldn't miss this for the world."

* * *

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Once on the surface, Claire bounced around in her silver EVA suit like a kid at soccer practice. "Look at Earth," she blurted when she caught her breath. "So bright and blue and white. Walking around out here, it's like heaven, like I'm in heaven."

As for me, I felt like hell until I saw how well the hydraulic fluid dissolved the yellow paint from the metal shell of the replica lunar lander. I used the bunting I'd brought along to rub it clean. It took a while. Eventually I improvised a rake out of the LEM ladder and started to systematically wipe miner footprints from the regolith near the lander. Claire walked ahead, picking up litter, stowing it, detrashing the site.

As I raked I realized that Armstrong's famous bootprint was in there somewhere, but I had no choice except to obliterate it along with the miners'. When Claire finished her sweep of the site, she came around behind me and scattered handfuls of regolith to obscure the little furrows from my rake. It sounds easy enough, but out there in the clumsy suits, it was slow going.

Two and a half hours later, Tranquility Base looked like a museum exhibit again, except for the missing Armstrong footprint.

As it was perhaps the most famous single footprint in human history, we needed to replace it somehow. First we downloaded archival images from NASA's website and studied them carefully. My plan was to step gingerly *on* the passive seismometer so as not to leave tracks, then to bounce up the ladder and position myself as Armstrong had. From there it would be a simple matter of a hard step down from the bottom rung.

"Wait," Claire said.

"Make it quick," I said. "We've got about twenty minutes before we get into reserve life support."

"What's your boot size?"

"Eleven 2E. Does it matter?"

"According to NASA archives, Armstrong had small feet. His boot size was nine and a half. *Narrow.*"

"Where the hell are we going to such small feet?"

She pointed down to her boots. "Nine and half. Narrow."

So we traded places. "One small step for Claire," she said just before she jumped. "One large step for all Clairekind."

* * *

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Because we'd lost so much time cleaning up the site, I radioed in a negative report on the scouting trip and we had to drive straight back. Still, the drive was breathtaking, the sun high and slow across the sky, the Earth slipping to our left and then setting. We were both a little giddy at what we'd done.

From the moment we docked at the main dome, you could sense that the atmosphere at the resort had turned hectic. Less than twenty-four hours remained until the contest's conclusion. More Hyatt people had come up to join the partygoing journalists and hotel guests in a kind of last day's frenzy of food and wine and excess.

The big table on the dais in the Copernicus Room was askew, crowded with half-empty glasses of wine, coffee cups and abandoned room service plates littered with stale food. I found Stewart stretched across three chairs in the corner, drunk and sullen. Candace, who had been conducting virtual press conferences Earthside since early morning, was desperate, her voice hoarse. I took over for her, worked for eight hours straight, fielding questions and calls, infusing false cheer into our dismal numbers, pretending surprise and pride that "Luna," ahead all week, looked like it was going to finish first.

Claire and I became separated once I started to work, but then she really disappeared, into the gym, I supposed, or to take a nap after our excursion. Then it was dinnertime and I'd been too busy to connect with her, and I frankly was relieved that she wasn't there for the humiliation of the final night's banquet — half the chairs empty, Stewart incoherent and helped to his room. During the gazpacho I was passed a note from Claire telling me she'd gone out on another EVA, entirely on her own, a walk around the dome to collect some rocks to take home, that she would find me later.

But when I looked for her at midnight, she was nowhere to be found. I dragged myself off to my room, fatigued beyond belief after the long day, and threw myself on my bunk.

I couldn't sleep. An active solar flare sent a wave of broadband static across all the communications channels, and the web audio link I lay there listening to reminded me of radio in the old days, fading in and out, conversations washed by flurries of audio snow....

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"Loyal caller, long-time listener, Art," a female voice said, a voice velvet with seductive breathiness, a siren's voice, eerily familiar. "Call me 'Heavenly Ten.' I used to call you from Earth. Remember me? You were so my hero."

Art's voice changed. "My god, I *do* remember you. Is that you, 'California Ten'? It's been...years. What can I do for you?"

Art recognized it too, or at least the program of his AI did, some deeply enduring quality of that voice. I remembered hearing a voice like that while listening to Art Ball when I was a kid. Almost all of Art's callers, then as now, were men, but once in a while you'd hear that siren's voice and the whole conversation changed, moved as if a step to the side. The voice seemed to speak directly to an old subroutine in the AI, to open a secret trap door: Ball had always had a weak spot for women who did call, not for the tough ones or the airheads, but especially for women whose breathy voices promised some unseen sybaritic redemption — as his audience had been mostly male, the old-fashioned attitudes had been part of his appeal. The trap door was apparently still programmed in the AI, and you could hear him responding.

"I'm *so* mad at you, Art," the voice pouted.

"Oh my god, *why*?" And you could hear it, the genuine nervousness in his voice, the uncertain edge that comes from loss of confidence.

"You betrayed all of us women who love you when you blew off that moon contest. If you'd only supported it, think how many of us would be looking up there right now. And next week and the week after that. Gazing at the moon because it meant something." I thought *Candace*? then remembered her hoarse voice. Still, something familiar. "But that's all right," the voice went on. "I understand, Art, why a romantic idea like NAME THAT MOON wouldn't appeal to you. You're too old to be romantic anymore. I'll bet you never sit with Ramona outside your trailer in Parump looking at the moon on a beautiful night...."

"Awwwoh," Art moaned. "You know, Ten? You might be right. It would have been romantic."

"*Might be*?"

"Ramona is going to be annoyed with me."

"As she ought to be. You're letting those liberals from the New Solar Order pick the name of the moon."

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Art moaned again. "What name do you suggest? Just tell me. I'll log onto that website and vote myself."

"What really matters is that your listeners call." Now I heard something else in the voice, a kind of marketing savvy hiding behind the voice changing circuit.

A couple more sentences and I was sure. The voice belonged to Claire.

I looked at my watch. Two A.M., twelve hours until the end of the contest. It was too late now to change the result, I decided. Still, I was touched down to my toes and smiled as I shut down all the circuits in my cubicle and settled back on my pillow. I told myself: Claire had tried to help, and it would all be over soon.

I OVERSLEPT. When I woke I took a long, hot shower, and slowly got dressed without logging in. On the final day of the contest, at the final hour, I went directly to the Copernicus Room to see the wreckage.

Barry Stewart, I was surprised to see, was on his feet, wearing a fresh suit and clean shaven. He was gesturing with animation to a larger knot of media people than I'd seen all week. Judging from equipment logos, new techs had also flown up. I recognized four network heavy hitters in the restricted area behind the dais, covering the story in holo presence. There was a special electricity in the room. A middle-aged guy with a recent face-lift waved cheerfully to me from another crowd, I waved back — he looked very familiar, but I couldn't recall his name. Candace came striding by and I asked her who he was.

"That's Karl Pope, you dummy," she said in her hoarse voice, stopping, looking me in the eye, cocking her head. "Didn't you hear he'd flown up from Maui?" She smiled. "Though you of all people I shouldn't be calling dummy. I apologize."

"For...?"

She rolled her eyes and shook her head, turning away from me with her arms raised, leaving me to stare at the wallscreen. The full moon cycled in the repeated time-lapse pattern that had been pixelled in all week, overlaid with our numbers. I blinked, rubbed my eyes in disbelief.

Overnight we'd gone from eighty million hits on our netsite to three and a half billion Earthside voters.

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And that's how the moon came to be named Art Ball.

It is a strange result, I agree, as loony as Art Ball himself, and six months later, as I write this story, the moon's new official name is still too improbable for most people to take seriously. But the attention the new name created nonetheless saved us. Our bookings immediately shot up six hundred percent and the reservations site clogged with traffic. As you probably know, we're booked solid to the end of the decade and we're planning to excavate a new wing. What with all the extra flights United's put on, the United/Hyatt consortium's already started work on another landing pad.

Yet for all its odd quality, you do hear the moon called Art Ball up here once in a while (particularly among the miners), and you certainly do hear the name used more and more Earthside. Good-natured people look to the night sky and turn to one another with smiles and say, "Art Ball." All over the world, I'm told, kids have started pointing up and telling their friends that you can see his eyes, his face. Claire and I sat through a movie just last night, a remake of Huck Finn set on a Mars mission, and midway back to Earth the Huck character turned to the Jim character and said, looking to Earth's moon, "There he is. There's Art Ball."

When you live on the moon for a while, you adjust to its rhythms. After we celebrated the end of the contest, after Claire explained how she'd used voiceprints from Art Ball's archives to identify the AI's weak spot, and after she got her chance to spurn Karl Pope one more time, most of the media people flew back to Earth. Claire stayed on and we watched Earth set earlier and earlier in the shadowy coming of the real end of a lunar day.

On our way back from Tranquility Base, Claire had promised to spend a night with me, and I talked her into a trip for the two of us over an entire lunar darkcycle, fourteen days. Barry got me the keys to the spacehab module at Aitken Basin, near the moon's south pole. We both took leaves and I drove the van down there.

At 1,350 miles in diameter and two miles deep, the Aitken Basin is one of the largest craters in the solar system. It's a grand sight, all right, but that's not why we went down there.

Inside the basin is a smaller crater, large enough by Earth standards,

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but tucked inside the basin with a group of two others. This crater is the Shackleton Crater (yes, named after my great-great-grandfather, Ernest, of Antarctic fame). The spacehab module we drove to is parked at the point where the west rim of the Shackleton Crater intersects with the rims of the two other craters, forming a peak about 4,000 feet above the basin floor and canted at just the right angle to escape Earth's shadow. Because the sun falls on this patch of ground day and night virtually year-round, the Dutch astronomer Ockels called this spot "the peak of eternal light." Solar panels placed on the peak generate continuous power to the module, keeping it warm and cozy, the love nest of preference for a quarter million miles. EVA walks are spectacular. It's as if you had the Grand Canyon, Haleakala Caldera, and Everest absolutely all to yourself.

After a couple of days, Claire found herself pointing out how small a dot New York made when you looked for it, squinted hard, tried to make out its lights at night. "Just a dot," I remember her saying that day, curled on a sheepskin by the big lexan window. "From here New York is so just a dot. I can't tell you how much I've gotten to like it here. This is the ultimate place to get away from it all."

The day we'd left Blue Moon I'd turned down an unsolicited job offer, the best that had turned up so far, to be the head of PR for the Moorea Beach Hotel. When I could turn my back on the best Tahiti had to offer, I knew my heart belonged on the moon. That Claire wanted to stay here as well meant my heart would be full.

She handled some of the rocks she'd picked up earlier in the day, rocks for a collection she'd started the day we'd gone to Tranquility Base. She'd noticed that not all the moon rocks were of a uniform charcoal cast. Seen up close, many had subtle hints of color in them, trace elements and their oxides, the building blocks of Earth, hints of ocher and umber and copper and gold, silver and white, deep reds and darker browns — all the colors of life hidden in the raw rock.

"Like Barry said," I told her. "There's a job for you up here if you want it. A life."

"Count me in," she said, snuggling close.

I buried my face in her soft hair.

A half hour later, as we sat looking at the milk-swirled blue pearl in the sky, she asked, "What do you think Barry'll want me to do?"

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"Marketing," I shrugged. "Work with Candace."

She was looking at Earth through the big window. "Mmmm, Shack?" Claire finally said. "You know, I'm just thinking, well, for later? Like I say, I'm just thinking, and maybe you know?"

"Know what, Claire?"

"Technically speaking, is 'Earth' a proper name?"

COMING ATTRACTIONS

FOR FEAR OF JINXING the project, we're hesitant to promise next month's lead story...but at this writing, it seems likely that our cover story in February will be "From A to Z, in the Sarsaparilla Alphabet" by Harlan Ellison. This piece gives us twenty-six vignettes, each attached to a different deity or mythical beast. If you want to read about Ilithyia, Tahamtan, Xolas, or Mut, look no further. If you're curious about viginae, you couldn't pick a better place to learn about them. Plus there's a cameo appearance by Joe R. Lansdale—and he's armed and dangerous.

Also scheduled for next month (as if you could possibly need anything more to satisfy your yearning for great stories, but we aim to please and please again) we'll have a moving novelet by Amy Sterling Casil about a disabled woman, "To Kiss the Star."

The list of stories coming soon includes "Eternity and Afterwards" by Lucius Shepard, "Demolition" by Nancy Etchemendy, "The Real Thing" by Carolyn Ives Gilman, and "A Fish Story" by Harvey Jacobs. And lots more (but you already knew that). Keep that subscription up to date to make sure you get in on all the action.

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CURIOSITIES

THE FOURTH DIMENSION, BY C. HOWARD HINTON (1904)

DON'T BE fooled by this "nonfiction" volume's camouflage as a treatise on popular mathematics. It was the twentieth century's first grimoire. Anticipating hypergeometric sf like Henry Kuttner's "Mimsy Were the Borogoves" or Greg Bear's "Tangents," Hinton wasn't satisfied with describing the fourth dimension. He wanted to take us there, and provided maps.

Just as a magus must forge his own ritual tools, Hinton urged readers to build the models that enable lowly 3-space entities to visualize a 4-space tesseract or hypercube. His apparatus comprises twenty-seven differently colored slabs, three sets of twenty-seven colored cubes, and twelve "catalogue cubes" whose varicolored faces, edges and corners are 3-space maps of the tesseract's hyperfaces. A sumptuous fold-out illustration shows the catalogue cubes in all their glory.

By memorizing and visualizing these gaudy shapes in the proper relation and sequence, you supposedly develop an intuitive understanding of the tesseract's 4-space structure. "I think there are indications of such an intuition," said Hinton cautiously. Step by step you grasp the eldritch, unimaginable architecture of H. P. Lovecraft's R'lyeh and other cyclopean relics of the Great Old Ones, while staying safe at home.

Physically safe, anyway. Some experimenters found that programming themselves with those compulsive visual sequences could rot the brain. "They are completely mind-destroying," a *Scientific American* reader warned after Martin Gardner's column mentioned the Hinton cubes. This victim had broken free from the autohypnotic imagery, but with difficulty. Spying on Cthulhu remains unwise.

Not for nothing do Hinton's alternative verbal mnemonics for tesseract geometry (see Appendix II) include such ritual chants as "3 faces: satan, sanet, satet...."

— David Langford

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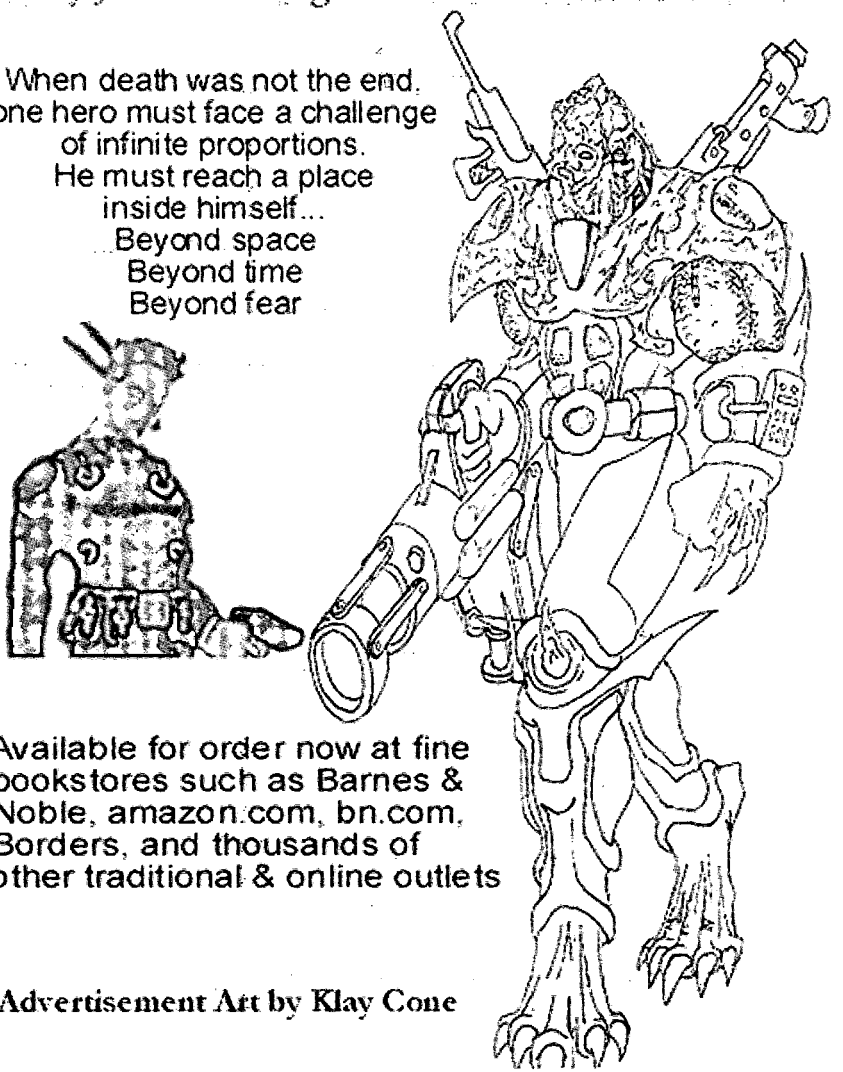

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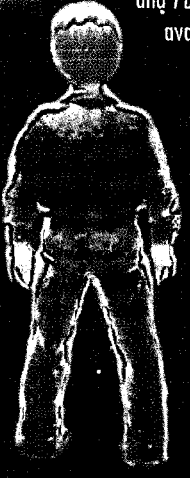

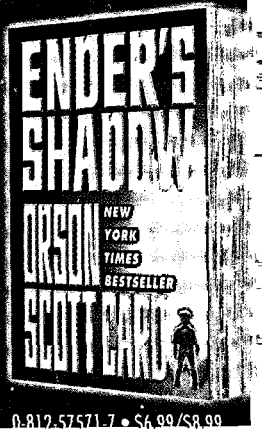

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